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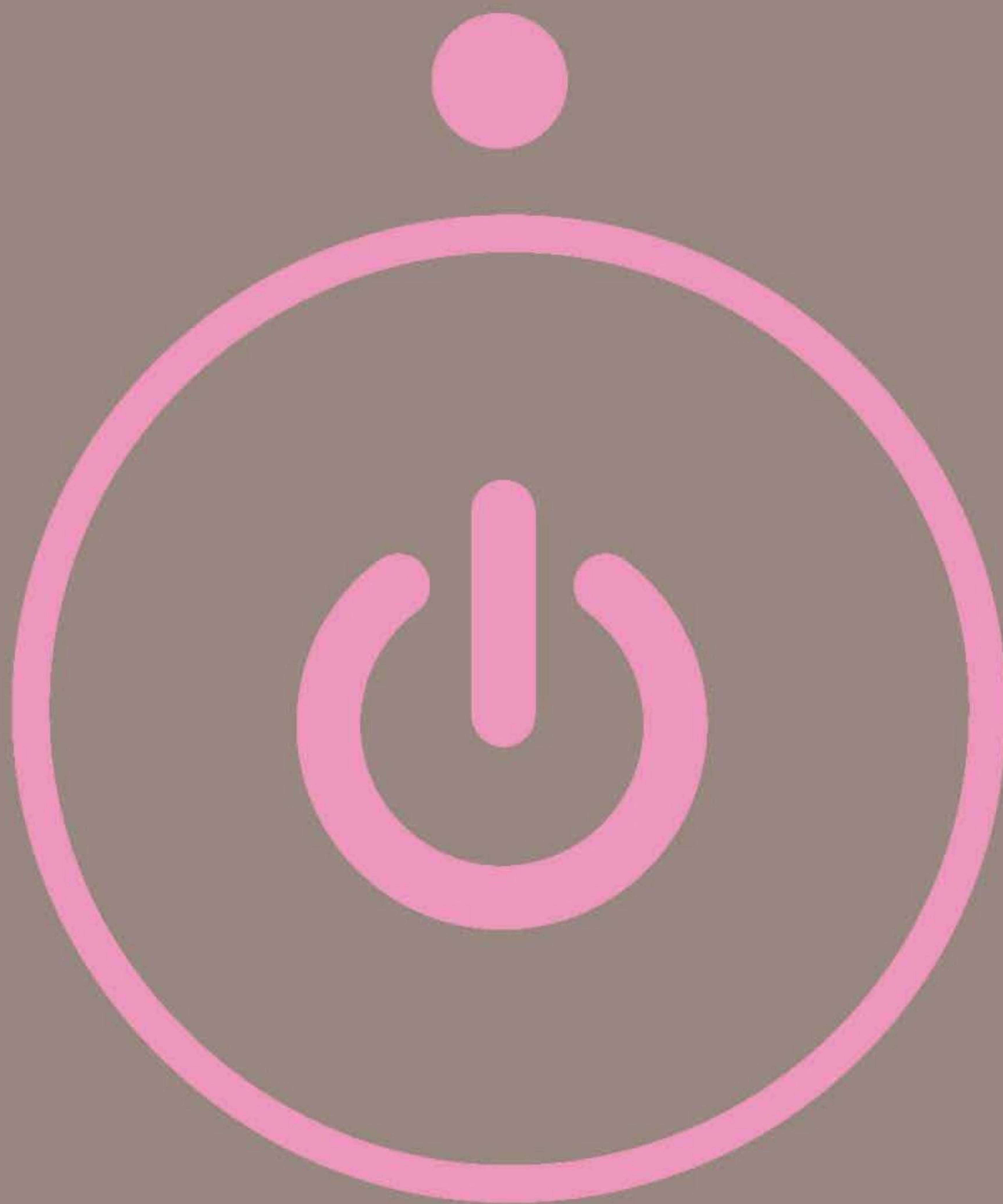
NINTENDO REINVENTS

WII U TAKES CONTROL OF THE NEXT GENERATION



Due in 2012, Wii U will be the first of the next generation of game hardware. As well as retaining an optical drive 1, its facing edge conceals SD card and USB ports 2, but more forward-looking is the console's controller, which presents a panel 3 that incorporates a camera and Wii Remote sensor bar, in addition to a 6.2-inch touch-sensitive screen 4, stereo speakers 5, a pair of 3DS-style Circle Pads 6, and a traditional D-pad 7. We take a look at Nintendo's first HD console in more detail on p84

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POWER

Witnessing the worship at the altar of Nintendo

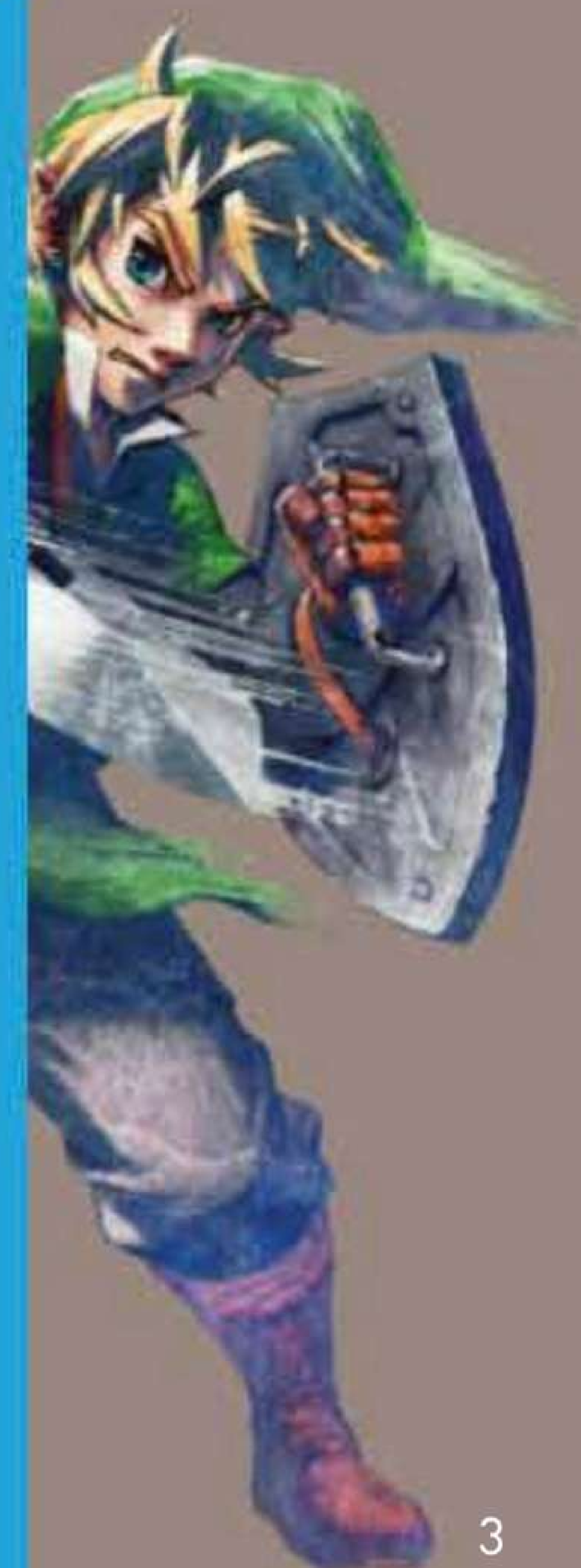


Nathan Drake put up a decent fight, and even old Master Chief tried to steal the show by popping his head through the door, but at this year's E3 the most excitable audience response was inspired by some sand. As Nintendo's Wii U promo video showed how the system's unique new controller could be placed on the floor and serve to show the precise lie of a golf ball (in a bunker, in this case), the assembled masses exploded into jubilation, making noises more often aimed in the direction of things like successful space shuttle launches. For a brief moment on a June morning in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, it seemed like the world had lost its mind. But then these things tend to happen when you pour a few thousand die-hard Nintendo nuts into the same room as Shigeru Miyamoto.

The wave of excitement was partly inspired by an all-round sense of befuddlement. There was a fat helping of disorientation when the world was presented with the original DS, and at least as much when Nintendo first sketched out its plans for Wii, but the confusion surrounding Wii U's introduction was of a different order. Even sitting there in front of giant projection screens capable of displaying Reggie Fils-Aime's eyebrows at a frankly frightening scale, it wasn't immediately clear that Nintendo's new platform was even a platform at all.

But this audience had become accustomed to Nintendo's habit of launching curve balls, and despite the lack of clarity in some of the company's messaging, the overriding feeling throughout the auditorium was one of possibility. Outside of those walls it's been a different story, however, with Nintendo stock dropping to levels they haven't suffered since before the Wii launch in 2006. Clearly the company has some work to do in explaining the thinking behind Wii U, and its applications.

Our cover feature on p84, in which we talk to one of the men leading game development on the console, will fill in a few blanks. Perhaps in the coming months we'll get a chance to play that magical golf game, too. ■



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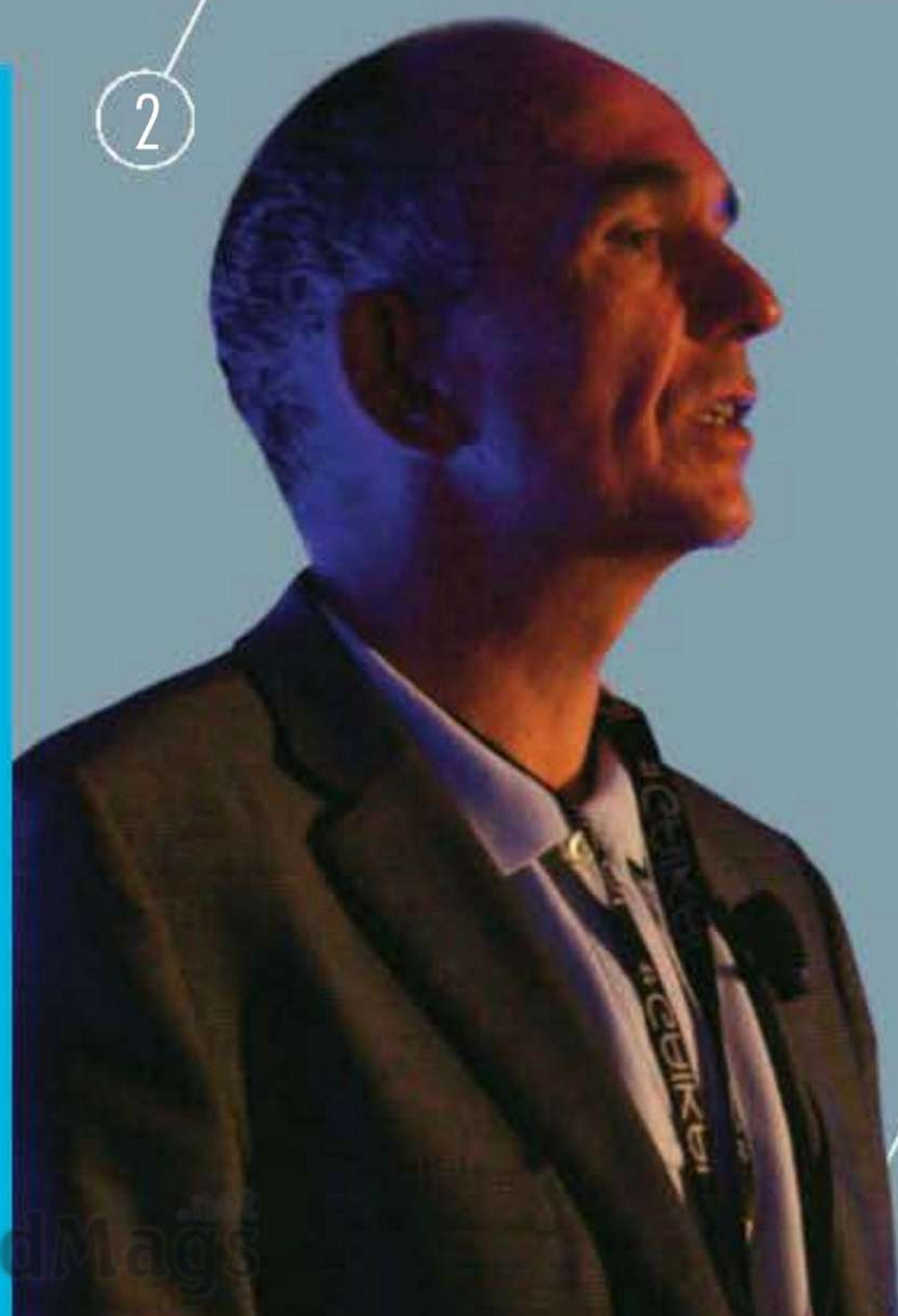
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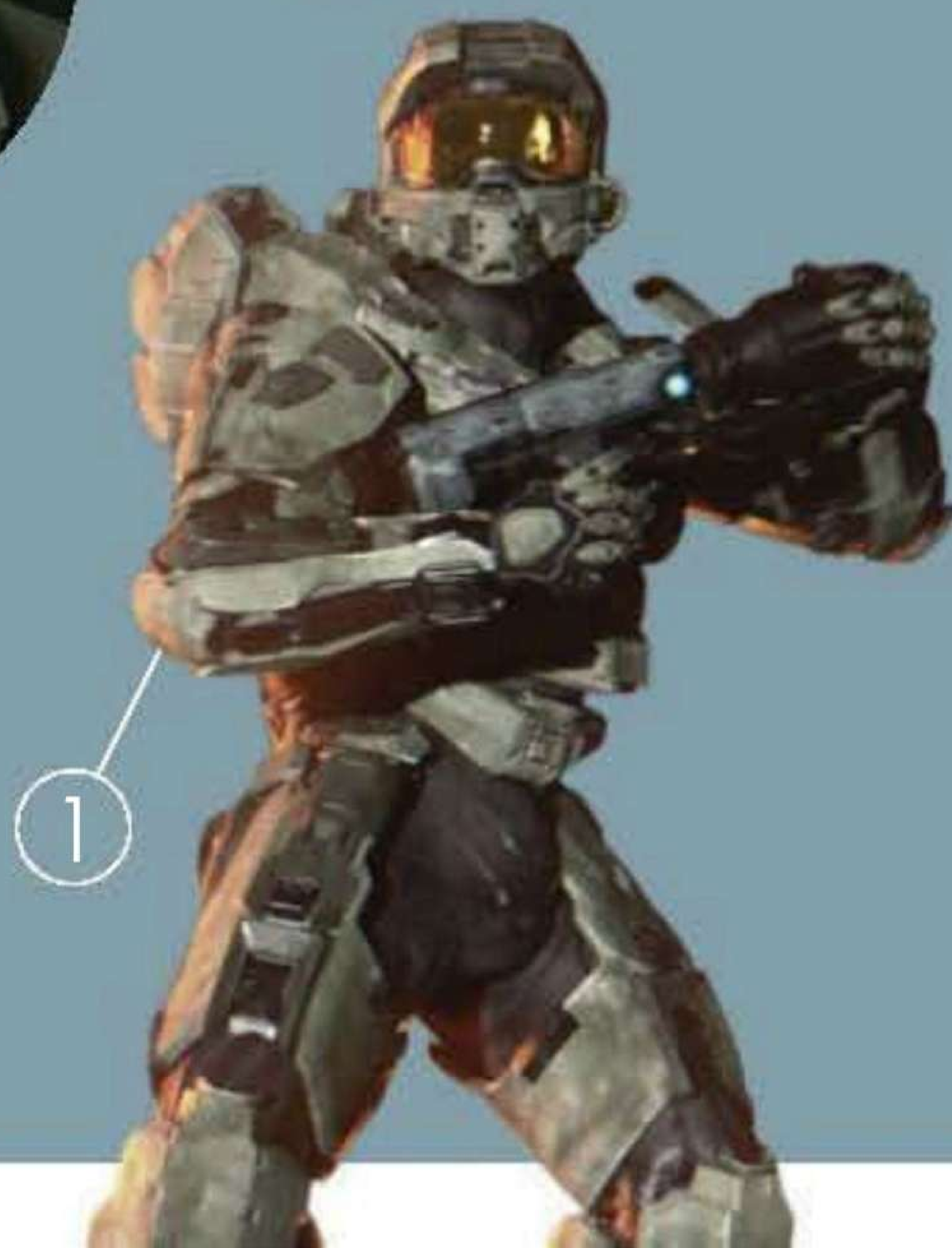


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WLEDGE

As the key event in the videogame calendar, the Electronic Entertainment Expo serves as an effective treatment for the traditional summer drought. In this issue's Knowledge we look at its effects on the game industry as we examine the showings put in by Microsoft (1), Sony and Nintendo (see p8), taking in the likes of *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* on PlayStation Vita (2), its big brother *Uncharted 3* on PS3, and a selection of new 3DS games including a familiar-looking *Mario Bros* (3). E3 wasn't all about traditional console gaming, though, and our time in LA brought us together with David Perry (4), whose revolutionary cloud-based Gaikai (p20) is in the process of being rolled out as this issue of **Edge** goes to press. Back in the UK, we talk to the organiser of the forthcoming Edinburgh Interactive event (5), which in its ninth year is setting out to become a conference with even broader appeal (p22). Heading back into the cloud once more, we talk to the VP of engineering at OnLive (6) as the company prepares to launch its ambitious service on European soil, complementing its original offering with the offer of triple-A gaming experiences piped to tablet computing devices (p24). Soundbytes (7) gathers together some choice industry chatter (p26), and in My Favourite Game (p28) we coerce fantasy author Joe Abercrombie (8) into choosing the videogame closest to his heart.



bit.ly/lM3xIa
Up-to-the-minute game news and views

Nintendo pulls its shapes at E3

The annual Electronic Entertainment Expo sees a familar-looking recipient scoop the plaudits



Nintendo's stance isn't clear on things like DLC for Wii U games (the console has no hard drive, after all), or indeed how the platform's supposedly superior online play will pan out, but such factors only helped to make it the most-talked-about topic during E3's duration



bit.ly/j9gX5q
Extensive coverage of E3 2011

Every 12 months, the videogame industry congregates at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles to do its dance. As with any dancefloor, everyone is watching everyone else, and to the most dazzling display of footwork goes the trophy. This year it was Nintendo's turn to pick up the prize thanks to Wii U. The potential afforded by the platform was enough to convince even-handed observers that Nintendo has another hit on its hands, even as it got its limbs tangled by choosing to focus too much on the controller rather than the system as a whole.

"People were saying they weren't sure if it was just a peripheral or if there was actually a console attached to it," admits **Katsuya Eguchi**, the man behind Wii U game demos such as *Chase Mii* (see p89). "I'm sure you're well aware that it is an actual system, a console as well as controller, but during the press briefing we decided to focus on the new controller because that's what's really, really new about this system and what we wanted to focus on."

Wii U's distinctive qualities reflected a theme that ran through the entirety of E3, as platform holders, publishers and developers alike poured energies into not only capturing the attention of gamers but try to keep a grip on it.

Game of the show contender *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* used a brute-force tactic by simply being larger and more complex than just about any other title at E3. If you were one of the many who sank time into *Fallout 3*, or indeed *Skyrim*'s predecessor, part five promises to swallow your entire gaming life when it launches later this year.

Other solutions were less obvious, with Sony presenting *Ruin*, a dungeon crawler that can be played on PS3 and then picked up on Vita (or indeed vice versa) to carry on from the precise point at which your previous session ended.

OnLive's cloud-based system, meanwhile, is all about giving the player as many touchpoints as possible (see p24), allowing play to begin on a tablet device over breakfast, continue in an Internet café at lunchtime, and resume on a big-screen HD TV in the evening.

For Nintendo, it's a matter of being able to play on your console when the living-room TV has been commandeered by others. Children, in particular, will flip for the concept.

Over the following eight pages we first take individual looks at the performances of Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo at E3, and then gather together a selection of the headline games that attempted to make the biggest noises in LA.

Press Association Images

E3 IN NUMBERS
This year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, which took place at the LA Convention Center on June 7–9, played host to 46,800 game industry professionals, including analysts, journalists and retailers (plus a number under the 'unknown' label, whose bags of freebies seemed suspiciously bulkier than those in the aforementioned categories). The attendees, travelling to the event from 106 countries, were courted by the wares of over 200 exhibitors.

"Life is the name of the game, and I wanna play the game with you." Shigeru Miyamoto takes to the stage at Nintendo's E3 conference to honour *Zelda*'s 25th anniversary

Infinity Ward's Robert Bowling takes to the stage to open Microsoft's conference with a taste of – well, what else? – *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*

MICROSOFT'S SCATTERGUN ASSAULT

With something for all the family, the 360 platform holder had plenty of targets – and a share of misfires

While Nintendo and Sony both had the appeal of the new at their E3 press conferences, Microsoft was first to play its hand. Sensing that it needed to demonstrate its own brand of innovation, this was its opportunity to show how Kinect will transform the Xbox 360 experience in the near future. The results were mixed. To be fair, the highs of *Mass Effect 3*'s squad commanding via voice control outweighed the lows of *Disneyland Adventures*, whose presentation seemed to drain the entire Galen Center of goodwill, but the showing felt like a mixed bag rather than a broad canvas. Lionhead's *Fable: The Journey* brought confusion rather than confidence, while the revelation that *Minecraft* is coming to 360 with Kinect functionality won the hearts of the hardcore like a Jedi mind trick (we'll save our words about *Star Wars Kinect* for the opposite page).



As ever, there was a celebrity flavour to Microsoft's presentation, with gaming enthusiast Ice-T joining Cliff Bleszinski on stage to show off *Gears Of War 3*, and UFC president Dana White on hand to introduce Xbox Live features that will allow users to interact and comment during live-streamed UFC dust-ups.

The announcement of 360 Bing search and YouTube functionality, meanwhile, underlined Microsoft's desire to further transform its platform from gaming console to entertainment portal.

Heavily scripted demo sequences are the mark of E3, and were at their most pronounced here with Microsoft. *Modern Warfare 3*'s underwater section at least showed how the game is hoping to vary its pace, although *Tomb Raider* didn't fare so well, the constant grunting and groaning of its heroine distracting from some undoubtedly attractive visuals.

Ultimately, though, E3 is where you set out your stall to audiences mostly comprised of battle-scarred industry observers, and the room wanted to see more explosions and fewer stage-school children flailing their arms in front of Kinect sensors. Tried-and-tested franchises, some remixed and some simply mixed up by motion control, dominated the programme, but the presence of *Gears Of War* and the unsurprising announcement of *Halo 4* were just about enough to give 360 owners something to smile about. Quite what message Microsoft will be selling at E3 in a year's time is anyone's guess, however.

MICROSOFT'S E3 HIGHS...

Halo 4
Frankly, the sight of Master Chief sitting on the lavatory could whip an E3 crowd into a drooling frenzy.

Kinect experiments
The announcement of *Kinect Fun Labs* and a Kinect-compatible *Minecraft* showed the chummier, more indie side of Microsoft.

...AND LOWS

Kinect for kids
Yes, the little blighters love a bit of motion-sensing fun, but this wasn't the place to dedicate so much time to spelling it out.

Technical hiccups
"Please reconnect controller" said the demo 360 partway through the big *MW3* reveal. Ouch.

THE BIG IP

How *Halo* is the core title Xbox relies on

Bungie may have passed the torch to Microsoft internal studio 343 Industries, but the yearly *Halo* release schedule that began with *ODST* hasn't been fumbled in the exchange. This year will see a graphically enhanced re-release of Bungie's original game contending with *Modern Warfare 3* come Christmas, but it was the *Halo 4* trailer with which Microsoft closed its show. As the Redmond firm increasingly pushes Kinect and its demographic-widening lineup, it increasingly depends on the Chief to ensure it's adequately catering to its traditional fans.



Forza 4 Turn 10; 360
Kinect head-tracking while driving in firstperson is welcome, if hard to adjust to (it's too easy to find yourself looking away from the TV), but otherwise this is business as usual, an evolution of *Forza* for both offline (with greatly improved AI and adaptive difficulty) and on (16-player multiplayer)



Kinect Star Wars Terminal Reality; 360
Longtime Star Wars gamers will appreciate this as a spiritual sequel to the *Rebel Assault* series, replacing the action in that rail shooter with the flailing of your arms. Due to its imprecise controls and hacking and slashing, this one's likely meant for those who grew up with the prequels instead



Halo: Anniversary 343 Industries; 360
The original *Halo* is getting a substantial graphical upgrade, and it looks pretty spectacular. Microsoft is clearly hoping to sell the game to those young enough to have missed it the first time around, but the return of such revered multiplayer maps will be enough to attract old hands, too



Fable: The Journey Lionhead; 360
Molyneux's journey during E3 was spent entirely backpedalling, attempting to establish that this game isn't as on-rails as it looked. The Kinect rein controls, and the promise that you'll grow to care about your horse, are positive, but the on-foot sections (on rails or not) seem limp



Halo 4 343 Industries; 360
This, 'the start of a new trilogy', looks very much like the end of the last one. Master Chief and Cortana are still floating in a crippled ship through space, having chanced upon an immense alien structure. But will 343 Industries be able to come up with a foe worthy of The Covenant?



Gunstringer Twisted Pixel; 360
Originally scheduled as an XBLA Kinect title, this so impressed Mattrick and co that they made it a full retail release, and they were right to: using one hand to marionette the Gunstringer and the other to make 'bang bang' motions is natural, fun and perfectly feasible while playing seated



AP/Press Association Images



AP/Press Association Images







The eye-searing shininess of the models rendered inside the world of *Forza Motorsport 4* wasn't *quite* reflected in the models drafted in to promote the game on Microsoft's stand (left), but at least the full range of Marcus Fenix's personality was captured faithfully by a replica standing elsewhere (above). Why was Snoop Dogg at E3? For Kinect game *YooStar On MTV*, of course

If you want to get a piece of new gaming hardware noticed during E3, it pays to have a marketing budget that extends to ads that almost cover entire buildings

SONY'S CORPORATE ALIGNMENT

As Vita prepares for lift-off, the keeper of the PlayStation brand keeps firmly on company message

We don't know how many emails have been sent from Sony president Howard Stringer to the company's videogame division emphasising how big a bet he's placed on stereoscopic 3D, but our guess is that if you printed them all out, it'd be enough to give environmentally obsessed colleagues a heart attack. For the second year running, Sony handed out 3D specs to the 6,000 attendees of its E3 conference, who had the opportunity to soak up a number of appropriately enhanced demos. The importance of the 3D push was only underlined by the surprise unveiling of a PlayStation-branded, budget-priced (well, $500 with *Resistance 3* and HDMI cable), 24-inch 3D monitor.



PlayStation Vita (formerly NGP) may not be 3D compatible, of course, but it enjoyed a strong showing at the event thanks to Sony aiming to correct some of the mistakes it made with PSP, starting with official price points of $250 for the Wi-Fi-only model and $300 for the 3G iteration.

It was functionality as much as software that marked Vita out as one to watch this time out: RPG *Ruin*'s demonstration of crossplatform, cloud-based saves, in particular, felt forward-thinking and relevant. Kaz Hirai's assertion that Vita intends to "truly blur the lines between entertainment and your real life" brought to the surface both a commitment to social gaming and also an interest in AR games like *Reality Fighters*.

Naturally, PS3 software was still high on the agenda, and seemingly punctuated each new 'science bit' of the presentation, with *Dust 514*'s exclusivity a talking point and franchise flag-wavers *Sly Cooper*, *Starhawk* and *Resistance 3* all raring to go.

It was *Uncharted 3*, however, that brought the house down. A gripping gameplay demo and probably E3's best trailer reminded everyone that when it comes to cinematically styled action, no one does it quite like Naughty Dog.

Move may not have been the spearhead it was at Sony's 2010 E3 conference, and it failed to muster much in the way of excitement this time around, even with Kobe Bryant on hand to show off a motion-compatible *NBA 2K12*, but at least it felt like part of the PlayStation family rather than the orphaned-child status once suffered by its EyeToy predecessor.

SONY'S E3 HIGHS...

Vita's pricing
Coming up with a massmarket-friendly price point for its new handheld was the boldest move Sony could have made.

Vita's reception
The new handheld attracted a constant stream of attention throughout E3.

...AND LOWS

Kevin Butler
Or rather the man's conspicuous absence. When you've just suffered a hack of PSN's scale, though, it's probably not the time for fist-pumping and trash-talking.

AT&T
The telecoms giant will be the exclusive Vita 3G partner. Cue spluttering all round.

THE BIG IP

Why *Uncharted* rules the roller-coaster

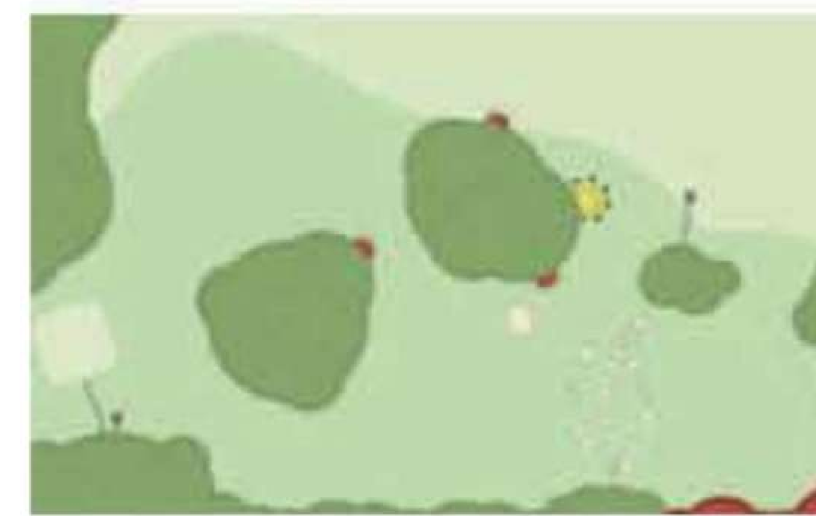
There are worse-looking poster boys than Nathan Drake. From the time of announcement, Sony has positioned Vita – and its software library – as being capable of the kind of in-depth experiences that smartphones have conditioned us not to expect from portable devices, and by squeezing the Drake experience on to the small screen, *Golden Abyss* is a crucial component of that push. The strong conference showing of *Drake's Deception*, meanwhile, showed that the most charismatic PlayStation action-game ambassador still has the ability to capture attention in an FPS-obsessed market.



LittleBigPlanet Tarsier Studios; Vita
Vita could be the platform to make creating levels in *LittleBigPlanet* a joy rather than a challenge, but our E3 demo only included singleplayer, which features new objects such as walls that must be moved with the player's finger. Cute, but we wonder how far such novelties will be put to use



ModNation Racers Vita SCE; Vita
It's sad to see that SCE San Diego, developer of the soulless PSP version of *ModNation*, is again at the helm of this, rather than series originator United Front, and as pleasant as drawing tracks with a finger is, the racing still seems sluggish, and the game generally graphically dull



Sound Shapes Queasy Games; Vita
This surprisingly lo-fi title is Vita's most promising game, a rhythm platformer that doesn't require rhythm, your actions just to survive the (often exacting) levels creating an astonishing soundscape. The level-design element may be the highlight, using the front and rear touchpads



Papo Y Yo Minority Media; PS3
One of the biggest surprise hits of the show, *Papo Y Yo* takes place within a small Brazilian child's imagination. It's essentially a puzzle-platformer, but far more surreal than that suggests: you enlist the help of a tiny robot named Lula and a rhino-like dinosaur that eats poisonous frogs



Dust 514 CCP Games; PS3
Announced as a PlayStation exclusive at Sony's press conference, CCP's FPS-within-an-MMOG still intrigues. As well as allowing *Eve Online* players to hire console-based mercenaries, the defences *Dust* players build against online attackers threaten to make format wars a reality



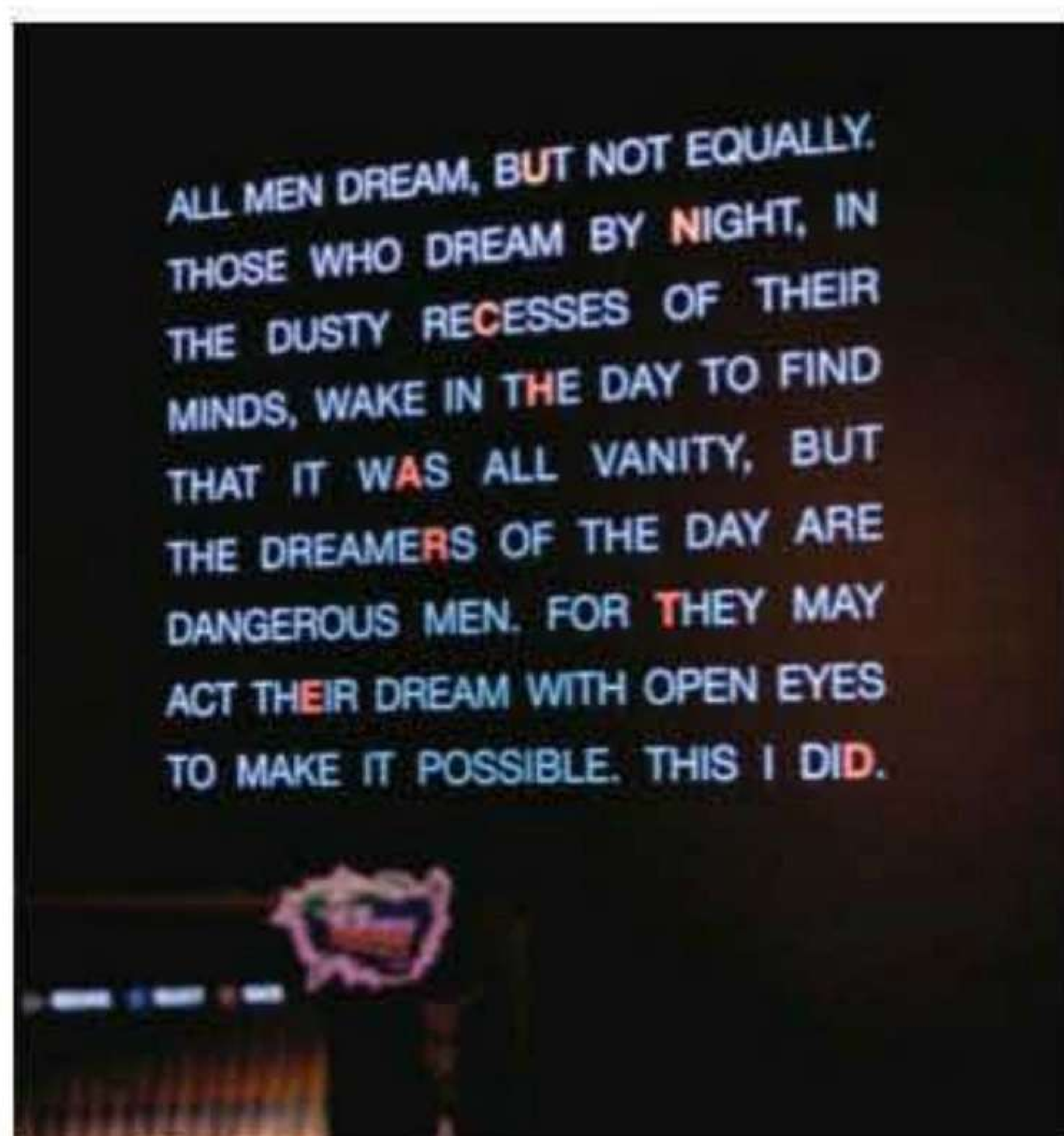
Ruin Idol Minds; PS3, Vita
Network play, allowing co-op and PVP, are central to this colourful top-down dungeon crawl. Users can also save their game to the cloud and resume their session from the comfort of their sofa thanks to seamless PS3/Vita compatibility. It's an RPG that could excel with its social connectivity



AP/Press Association Images









Despite being in many ways quite unlike the company that once brought the original PlayStation console into nightclubs, Sony still leads the pack when it comes to marketing, as demonstrated by its evocative E3 messaging. In truth, it could have used pieces of cardboard scrawled with messages written in marker pen to promote Vita and the crowds would have still swarmed

"What did you do at work today, dear?" "Oh, just commanded a live orchestra to play my favourite jingles from the *Zelda* series in front of thousands"

NINTENDO'S CONFUSING CELEBRATION

As it introduced a new platform in the shape of Wii U, the house of Mario failed to clarify its message to the world

As any committed Nintendo follower knows, this year marks *Zelda*'s 25th anniversary. If it wasn't already on your radar, it certainly would have been following Nintendo's E3 press conference, which opened with sequence that like felt part celebration and part statement of intent. The action was kicked off on a wonderfully sentimental note as pulses were raised by a live orchestral rendition of classic *Zelda* music before Shigeru Miyamoto arrived to the lift fan fever to a higher pitch. This was a showing about history, legacy, loyalty and familiarity before Nintendo made its big Wii U reveal. It was appropriate, therefore, that many of the company's most identifiable figureheads took their turn in the spotlight, delivering Miyamoto's nostalgic prologue and segueing into Reggie Fils-Aime's over-cooked, crowd-teasing rhetoric. The announcement of *Zelda: Four Swords* as a free DSi gift for one and all earned some more fan-community kudos before leading neatly on to 3DS.



The focus for Nintendo's most recent handheld console was a montage of coming attractions focusing on established IP. The sight of Mario in a revamped Tanooki suit drew big cheers, while *Star Fox* and *Kid Icarus* added to the franchise flurry. The announcement of *Pokédex 3D*, a free downloadable application which allows users to view Pokémon models in 3D and swap Pokémon data via SpotPass, was proof of a company working to get 3DS users to engage with their consoles even when they're not playing games per se. That it felt gimmicky, and had been pre-empted by SCE's PSP game *Invizimals*, wasn't lost on a share of the audience.

Wii U was greeted by a wave of enthusiasm which eventually settled down to studied contemplation as attendees tried to figure out if it was a simply a new Wii controller or an entirely new platform. By the end of the segment it was clear to attentive types that Wii U represented a much bigger deal than initially seemed to be the case, but there is no doubt that in pushing the format's big innovation to the fore it succeeded in delivering possibly the most confusing product introduction in videogame history.

EA CEO John Riccitello's pledge of allegiance towards Wii U wrapped things up, but it was rather lost on an audience still trying to get their heads around this new hardware's vision.

NINTENDO'S E3 HIGHS...

Wii U possibilities
Has there ever been a more flexible console platform? We'll save you the trouble of pondering. The answer is 'no'.

That Zelda glow
If anything brings to mind fond memories of a 25-year legacy, it's Miyamoto and a live orchestra.

...AND LOWS

Stock shocks
"Not innovative enough," said investment types of Wii U. (Perhaps they'll get to design a console one day.)

New 3DS IP
It was all about 'fan favourites', with little in the way of fresh content. Surely a double-edged sword.

THE BIG IP
The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Link was always going to have a strong showing – this is *Zelda*'s 25th anniversary, after all – but his E3 prominence had as much to do with the future as it did the past. The increasingly exciting-looking *Skyward Sword* looks set to remind us all what Nintendo is capable of when it comes to designing games around novel technology (forget MotionPlus; this is the first *Zelda* to be designed with Wii in mind from the start), while the Wii U *Zelda* demo gave a glimpse of what the flagship series will look like when the series' designers get to grips with that exciting piece of hardware.



Kirby Wii HAL; Wii
After Good-Feel's feel-good *Epic Yarn*, HAL reclaims its mascot. Kirby hoovers up the scenery and undergoes Mr Benn transformations like the past 15 years haven't happened. And new four-man co-op enforces a 'one-Kirby rule', leaving three to enjoy simple platforming and no suck



Star Fox 64 3D Nintendo EAD; 3DS
With aerial hoops, undulating suns and dizzying loops, *Star Fox 64* is a more natural candidate for a 3D makeover than *Ocarina Of Time*, as tumbling debris and booster trails conjure a solid air space. Better still, tweaked multiplayer adds video chat, liberating pilots from the horror that is Slippy Toad



Super Mario 3DS Nintendo EAD; 3DS
Promising a 3D *Mario* with a purer 2D play style, the *Galaxy* team rejects landmasses for shorter gauntlets, littered with Tanooki suits and airships. A noticeably kinder difficulty level marks this as a 3D *Mario* for newcomers, leaving diehards to admire sparkling 3DS visuals



Kid Icarus Uprising Project Sora; 3DS
This game probably began life as another title, then had Pit inserted, but it works all the same. It hardly resembles the NES game, but it's still solid. Shooter sections straight out of *Sin & Punishment* shake up exploration and platforming, and team-based multiplayer is a welcome change of pace



Mario Kart Retro Studios; 3DS
Retro has found itself becoming the 'new Rare', but if Rare had a crack at *Mario Kart* there's a chance it might try something more adventurous than this. Glider and underwater racing add little to the core of drift-boosting and shelling, but the track designs, at least, seem well constructed



Luigi's Mansion 2 Next Level; 3DS
The sequel to an underrated game, the lack of dual analogues causes an odd problem – fine 'Poltergust' movement uses the motion controls, which disturbs the player's view of 3D. When it works, though, the game looks like a diorama, and Luigi's a more animated hero than his brother




AP/Press Association Images







Unlike Sony, Nintendo is a master of keeping secrets, a fact illustrated once E3 got into motion and queues to sample Wii U began to grow. Out came the tape, along the carpet around Nintendo's booth (left) to show attendees where to form a line. Produced before E3 began, naturally the tape wasn't printed with 'Wii U'; instead, eager players followed a line that said 'New console'

THE GAMES OF E3

Or at least 24 of this year's highest-profile specimens…

1 Aliens: Colonial Marines
Gearbox; 360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Now no longer midwife to *Duke Nukem Forever*, Gearbox's focus has swung back to this sci-fi shooter. Taking place in the immediate aftermath of the film, *Colonial Marines* makes exciting use of the Wii U controller as the marines' iconic motion tracker

2 Amy Lexis Numerique; PS3
Flashback creator Paul Cuisset's downloadable title bucks the horror trend of making an eight-year-old girl the villain by making her key to your survival. Sticking close to the mysterious Amy is your protagonist's best hope of staving off the viral infection that has turned the rest of the world into undead freaks

3 Assassin's Creed Revelations
Ubisoft; 360, PC, PS3
Ezio's final chapter seeks to fix a weak spot: combat. When not snagging foes in the face with your wrist-hook, you're creating diversions with bombs. That's neat, but what really looks exciting are the extended chase sequences across boats, water and land

4 Bastion Supergiant Games; 360, PC
Overflowing with charm, this isometric shooter will raise your smile even further thanks to its hard-living, gritty narrator, who recounts every little thing you do – including accidentally dying. It's a small thing, but makes a world of a difference. This is a cute little sleeper hit you shouldn't snooze on

5 Binary Domain Sega; 360, PS3
A Blade Runner-esque plot involving a machine rebellion in the near future is the setup for Toshiro Nagoshi's take on *Gears Of War*. It looks a little like Sega stablemate *Vanquish*, but has a teamwork focus, and your two AI-controlled allies respond to spoken commands you can deliver via a headset or Kinect

6 Brothers In Arms: Furious Four
Gearbox; 360, PC, PS3
A surprise announcement, *Furious Four* is heavily influenced by Inglorious Basterds and doesn't shy away from ridiculousness. Gather three buddies with varying specialities, and your team can mastermind elaborate ruses like electric exploding bear traps

7 Dark Souls From Software; 360, PS3
Namco heard your plaintive cries that *Demon's Souls* wasn't challenging enough: *Dark Souls* is pretty much impossible. One of the first enemies you come across in the demo is a narked dragon. The game is also being made tougher by taking place in an open-world environment, so it's far less linear

8 The Darkness 2
Digital Extremes; 360, PC, PS3
This sequel focuses on 'quad wielding', which is just what it sounds like. Jackie can now use his darkling arms to disembowel enemies or rip out their hearts after pumping them full of lead. It's a thin gimmick, and hardly creative, but it sure is gory

9 Dead Rising 2: Off The Record
Blue Castle; 360, PC, PS3
Frank West is back and he's bringing new weapons, like fiery tennis balls, with him. The demo was fun but felt aimless, and it's unclear if the final game will be an open-ended playground for mowing down zombies or something more focused

10 Final Fantasy XIII-2 Square Enix; 360, PS3
Unfortunately, *FFXIII-2* looked like something of a mess at E3. Combat is now entirely automatic, the story (something about a looming blue giant) is indecipherable, and the random battles make it impossible to traverse a hallway unimpeded. Sure, it looks great, but that's long been expected from the series

11 Metro: Last Light 4A Games; 360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Though its predecessor was largely ignored, *Metro: Last Light* is primed to make people take notice. Claustrophobic and eerie, it forces you to ply stealth and firefighting skills at short notice. One particularly exciting sequence necessitated blending in with a crowd before shooting someone, then making a daring escape

12 Need For Speed: The Run EA; 360, PC, PS3, Wii
Someone at EA must have been watching the most recent Fast And Furious movie – why else would you inject a racing title with hefty amounts of QTE-powered parkour? *The Run* captures *Hot Pursuit*'s arcade intensity, but whether its on-foot segments will offer anything more than cinematic gimmickry is unclear

13 NeverDead Rebellion; 360, PS3
A theme song by Megadeth is pretty gimmicky, but not as much as the game's take on dismemberment: you can rip your immortal hero's head off and roll it around to solve puzzles. Otherwise it's a pretty generic thirdperson shooter that struggles too hard to be taken seriously, even with its absurd content

14 Payday: The Heist Overkill Software; PC, PS3
An E3 surprise, *Payday: The Heist* is a crime-themed co-op shooter which sees you and three friends engaging in bank robberies, shootouts and prison breaks while fighting against waves of SWAT teams, *Left 4 Dead* style. The robbery setup provides more complex objectives than merely staying alive

15 Rayman Origins Ubisoft; 3DS, 360, PS3, Vita, Wii
It would have sounded absurd to ever imagine that a *Rayman* game would be one of our most anticipated from E3, but *Rayman Origins* was one of the most beautiful, artistically minded games we saw, turning *New Super Mario Bros Wii* into a genuinely (never forced) joyful and skillful fourplayer platformer

16 Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City
Capcom; 360, PC, PS3
Arguably not exactly a *Resident Evil* game, it's indisputably a generic squad-shooter. You pick from a handful of predictable characters (the chick with the big gun, the dude with the bigger gun) and blast zombies. We've seen this done better before

17 Rocksmith Ubisoft; 360, PC PS3
Releasing a music game now seems like an absurdity for Ubisoft, and while this won't be a *Just Dance*, the low barrier for entry (it works with any guitar) and adaptive difficulty (it learns how well you are playing and drops more notes in, even during a single song) make this a likely success among budding guitarists

18 Ryse Crytek; 360
Cytek's Kinect offering appears to be the most hardcore-friendly title for the motion-tracking system to date. A trailer that promises a look at the underbelly of the Roman Empire segues into some rather gory firstperson combat between a Roman soldier and a barbarian assailant. Further details are scant

19 Saints Row: The Third Volition; 360, PC, PS3
Saints Row is no longer trying to ape *Grand Theft Auto*, and it's all the better for it now. *Saints Row: The Third* is just out-and-out goofy fun, letting you swat at passers-by with enormous wobbly dildos or hop into a hoverjet to carpet-bomb anyone you please. And all in co-op too. A big hit in waiting

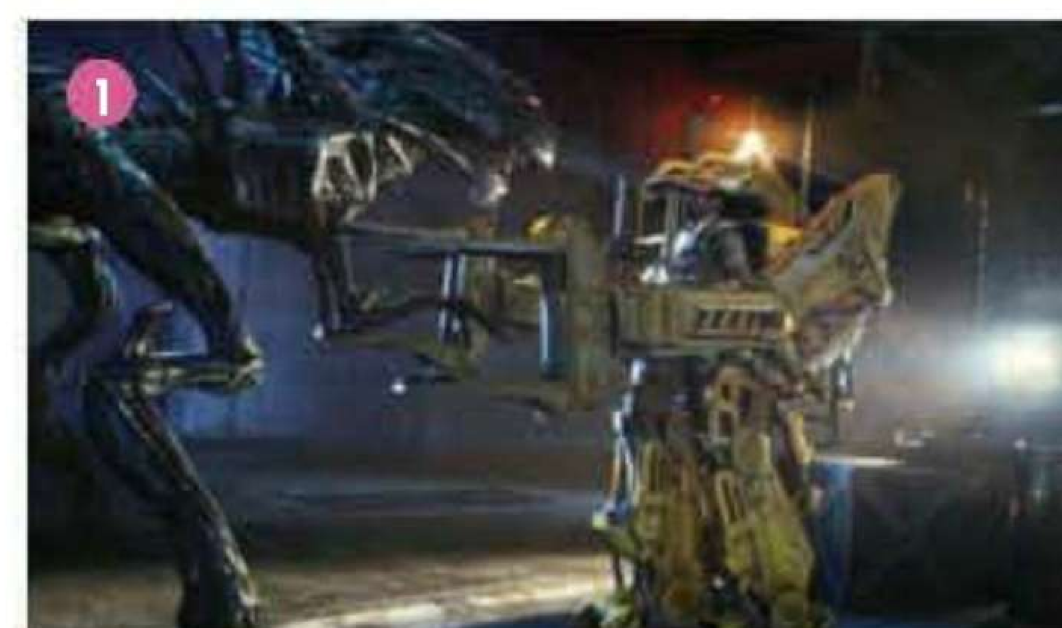
20 Silent Hill: Downpour Vatra Games; 360, PS3
A course correction for the *Silent Hill* series, *Downpour* straddles the line between combat, survival and scare tactics. Nothing can be trusted in this game – open a door, go through it and turn around: behind you won't be the same room you came from. Small tricks like these add up to a promising thriller

21 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Bethesda; 360, PC, PS3
The *Elder Scrolls* series is coming close to achieving perfection here. Gone are genre tropes like picking a class: you want to play as a battlemage? Then start using spells and wielding axes. You'll also face down more dangerous enemies, namely dragons

22 WH40K: Space Marine Relic; 360, PC, PS3
Sadly, *Space Marine* feels uninspired and generic. Though its guiding IP – Games Workshop's tabletop fantasy game – predates *Halo*, *Doom*, *Dead Space* and of course *Gears Of War*, this game doesn't add anything new. Mow down waves of green orks, stomp on their heads, stock up on ammo. There we are

23 Star Trek Digital Extremes; 360, PC, PS3
Gone are the days when licensed games should be immediately discredited. In a guided eight-minute demo, *Star Trek* is already looking good: a co-op buddy movie with a *Mass Effect* feel. CGI assets were imported directly from the movie, though the game's unannounced plot supposedly isn't connected to the new films

24 Street Fighter X Tekken
Capcom; 360, PC, PS3, Vita
Capcom puts its fan-service machine into overload here, and at the very least this one lives up to its title. It's hard to tell whether the *Tekken* crew still sport their ocean-deep movesets, but the game is gorgeous, running on the *Street Fighter IV* engine

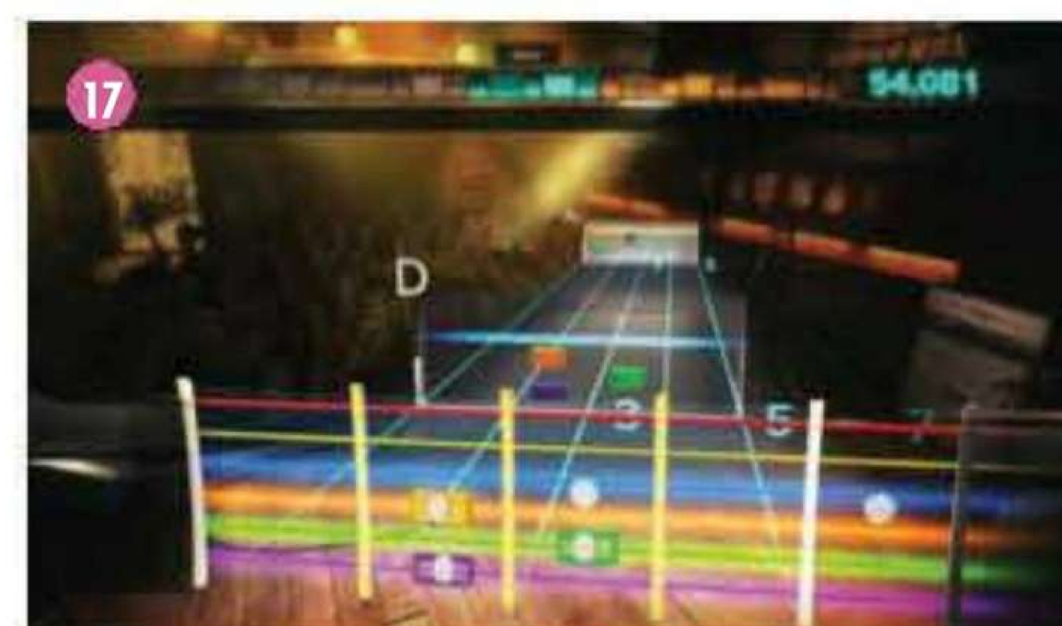

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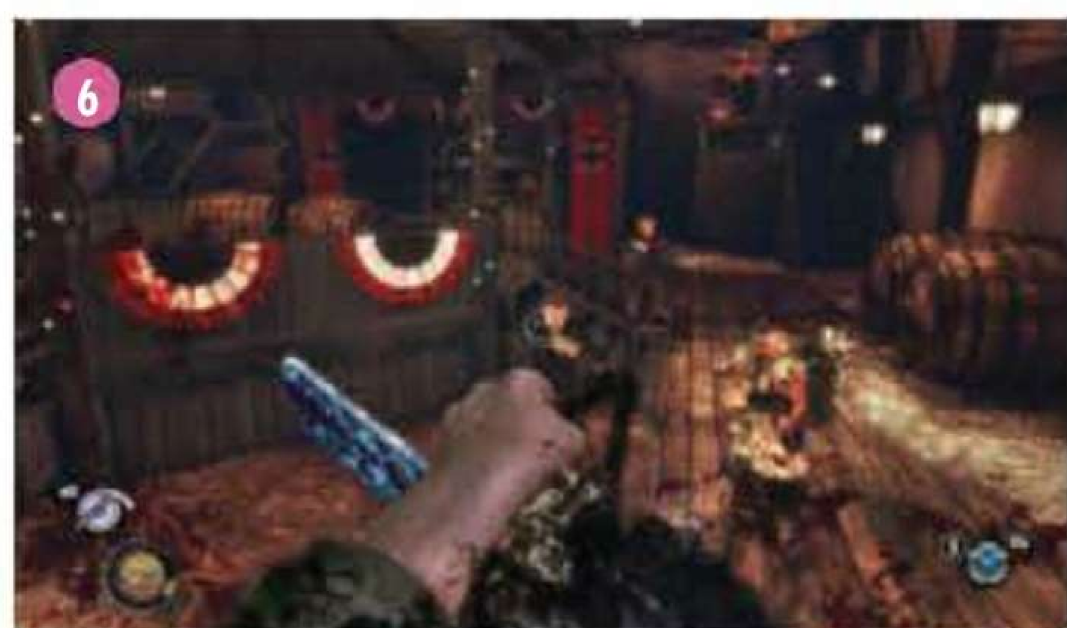
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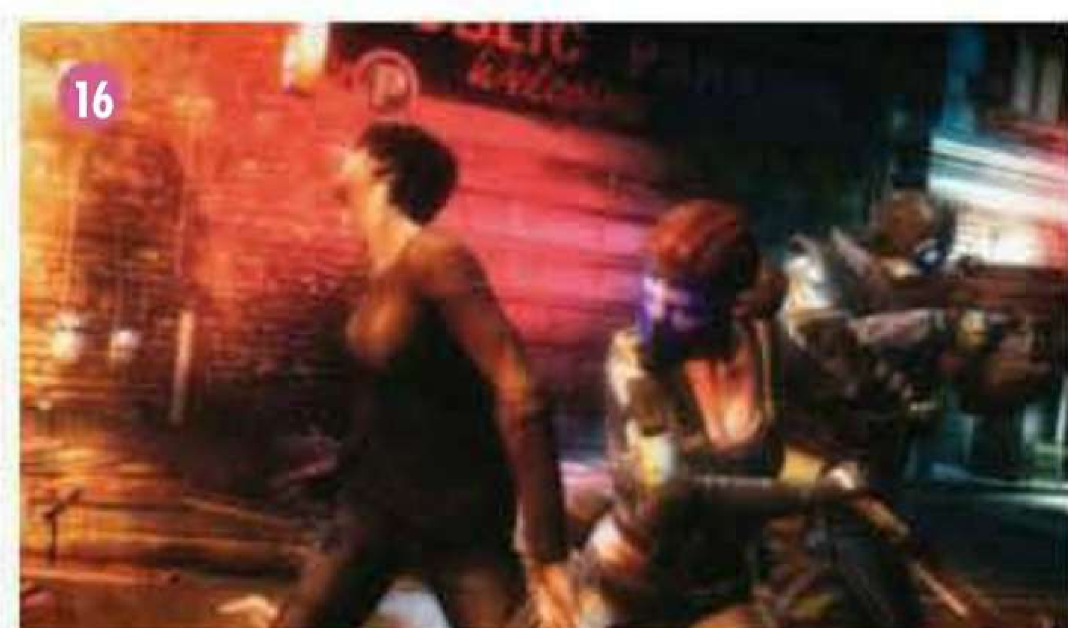

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Rewiring the game industry

After years of research and development, Gaikai is ready to change the way games are consumed

E3 is a noisy event, literally and figuratively. While headlines were grabbed, as expected, by the big three hardware players and their near-future promises, **David Perry**'s cloud gaming service Gaikai was seen but not necessarily heard by the masses. One reason is that Gaikai is very much a publisher- and developer-facing platform; a tool of empowerment for game makers to leapfrog the middlemen of retail and traditional delivery methods.

"I gave a speech at DICE in 2009 about allowing games to be much more accessible – flicking from one game to another – which started it," Perry tells us. "I was talking about the future of the industry – that some day this is going to happen and it's going to be really cool."

From there, the Shiny Entertainment founder has pioneered the concept himself, and with imminent high-profile rollouts across a range of Web sites and portals, Gaikai's potential is about to become real. The concept is simple: play any game in a browser without navigating away from the page. And the shocking truth? It works.

"With cloud gaming, there's two possible paths to take with it," Perry explains. "You build it for yourself, or you build it for everybody else. In our case we've decided to build it for everybody else, not for ourselves. Think of us as a service – the first interactive cloud platform that's open. That means that anybody can put software onto our cloud and stream the results anywhere they want. Our job becomes building the platform itself, all the client solutions. That allows people to create their own stores on top of our cloud."

With his ever-expanding team, Perry has been tackling each problem facing the ambitious project, from data centre positioning to what Perry acknowledges as "the biggest elephant in the room": latency. "We realised early on that the more data centres we have, the closer we get to the users," he says. "A lot of programmers went on record straight away saying 'this'll never work' – I'm an engineer and I get it, I'm there with them, I understand the conceptual problem. The thing they don't think about is I have about 60 people coming to the office every day, working on this problem. We've found many, many ways to do it, and we're executing all of them."

The reach of the lag-free cloud is attracting publishers, with 14 big names either signed or in the process of signing. But Perry is keen to highlight why Gaikai is proving a major draw for Web sites and portals too: "Now when you write about a certain game, you can put a little link there that says 'try it', or whatever you want, and that button, when clicked, instead of going to a publisher's site, will just open a little window on your page, enabling you to start playing right there. Because we charge for network time like AT&T, we just share that with the Web site. That revenue never technically existed before the cloud. That's the model we're offering – I haven't yet had a single Web site that doesn't want to do that. It's like: 'Here's your own Gaikai company'."

"I haven't yet had a single Web site that hasn't wanted to work with the model we're offering"

The draw for consumers is, of course, another primary concern: "People want to see what they're about to buy. [They] don't want to go through the friction of registering and installing. [It's] that concept of 'stop moving people around and start moving the game around' – make the product the advertising."

Running games on demand via a browser is no mean feat, but Perry is determined to take it even further, to keep up to date with the changing seas, and needs, of modern technology. As such, Gaikai also has its sights on the digital TV market: "We're streaming real stereoscopic 3D, so it's being generated by the server in realtime – it looks like a movie when you watch it. It's to answer a calling by TV companies that need content – they're making the electronics but don't have the content. If publishers want to put their games on digital TVs, we're building that capability into our network. It'll start showing up in 2012."

In the more immediate future, Gaikai's primed and ready to make its Facebook debut. Although no titles have been officially revealed, the promise of an MMORPG such as *WOW* running within the social network's environment is set to become a reality very soon.

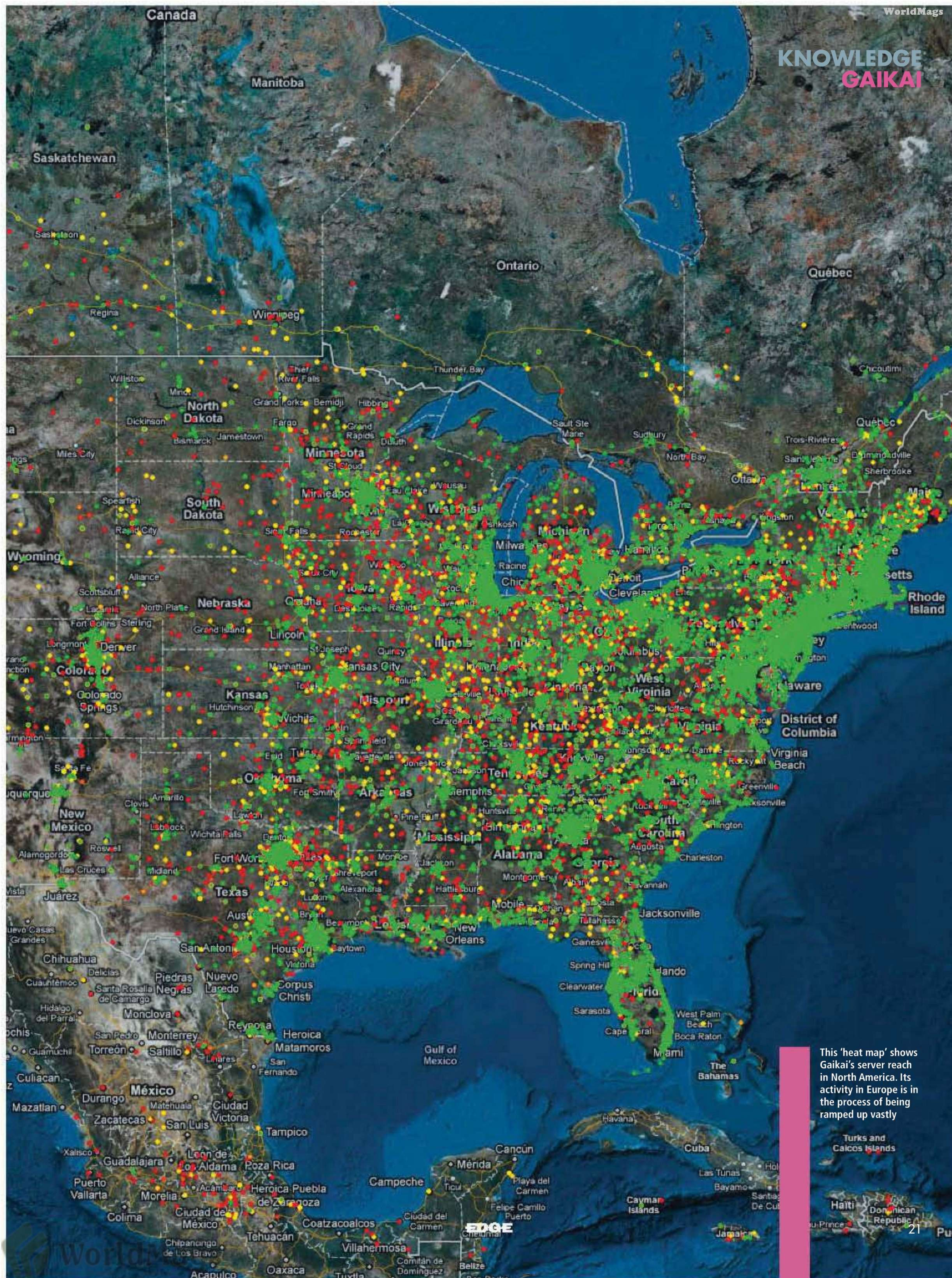
It would be sensationalist to pitch Gaikai and another cloud operator, such as OnLive (which we examine on page 24), as rivals. They're two big players in a vast, exciting new world of videogame delivery, with two different aims and approaches. Where OnLive strives to win over the videogame consumer, Gaikai is sowing its seeds with publishers and developers, offering the means to an end user. Rather than being lost in the noise of the game industry, services like Gaikai could soon become its bassline. ■



EA has adopted Gaikai and will use it to offer a range of content. Perry says concerns over latency issues for genres such as FPS can be laid to rest


David Perry (above) has bolstered Gaikai's profile by hiring big names including Brendan Iribe, the founder of Scaleform


bit.ly/lSnN5D
David Perry discusses more Gaikai details



This 'heat map' shows Gaikai's server reach in North America. Its activity in Europe is in the process of being ramped up vastly

The changing face of Edinburgh Interactive

With a new chairman and location, the ninth annual Edinburgh Interactive builds on its status as the gaming event for all tastes


David Yarnton, chair, Edinburgh Interactive


Alexa Turness, event director, Edinburgh Interactive

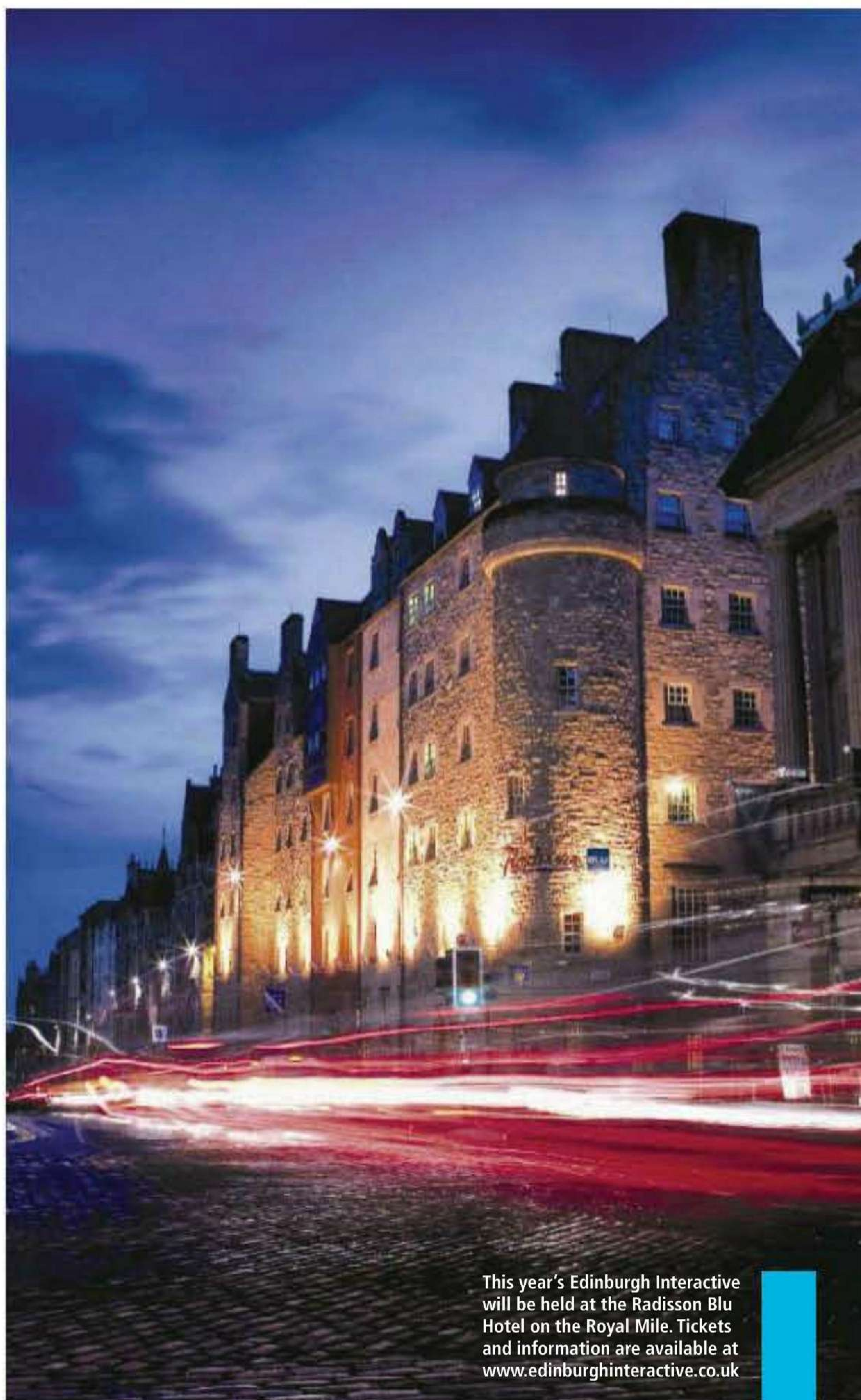


Edinburgh Interactive has earned a reputation as one of the most low-key and high-minded conferences in the gaming calendar. Since 2003, the event has attracted game industry figures like Ian Livingstone (returning this year) and former president of SCE Europe, Chris Deering (who acted as the event's chairman for four consecutive years).

In 2006 a name change from Edinburgh International Games Festival reflected a wider scope and audience, and this year's roster reinforces the variety on offer. Chaired by David Yarnton, MD of Nintendo UK, the focus is on the issues facing interactive media today.

"The tone of the conference will be slightly different [this year], focusing not just on videogames but the broader industries of interactive entertainment," says event director **Alexa Turness**. "We will of course discuss social networking, crossplatform and mobile gaming, but also touch on TV, film, music, technology, digital media and the arts in general." A focus on the UK's skills shortage also suggests insight into more domestic concerns, while a session on game-based learning with the likes of Jo Twist, Channel 4's commissioning editor for education, should shed light on how established institutions perceive the new world of educational gaming.

Though a great many conferences currently face either the consumer or the industry, Edinburgh Interactive has its eye on both, with free public sessions a crucial ingredient. It's this blurring of the lines between industry and public that makes the conference stand out; a mingling of entertainment and education that has turned the event, which takes place on August 11–12, into an indie-networking hotspot in the heart of the UK's arts scene. ■


This year's Edinburgh Interactive will be held at the Radisson Blu Hotel on the Royal Mile. Tickets and information are available at www.edinburghinteractive.co.uk

OnLive eyes Europe

"Any screen, anywhere" is OnLive's message as it prepares to launch its cloud gaming service beyond US shores this autumn

"Here's the background story: we came out last year at E3 for the PC and Mac, in December we came out with the OnLive game system [micro-console], then we came out with the controllers. What's inside of those is essentially the same chip you find in smart TVs, smartphones and tablets, so there's no reason that tablets and TVs can't be the same."

OnLive VP of engineering **Joe Bentley**'s enthusiasm comes through loud and clear as he outlines the past, present and future of OnLive's cloud-based gaming service at a behind-closed-doors E3 presentation.

Available in the US since June last year, OnLive is gearing up to launch its gaming-on-demand subscription model in Europe this year. When it does arrive on these shores, however, it's set to be a vastly improved, refined and more accessible service than ever before. For starters, the OnLive game library is bulking up rapidly. "We're adding something like two to four titles a week, which means that by the time we get to the UK we should be well beyond 100," Bentley explains.

> "Specs become irrelevant with cloud gaming: if it's a screen, you can probably harness it"

OnLive has its sights set on a broader market than just day-one gamers: with a deal in place that will see its technology embedded in TV sets from US brand Vizio, the company's reach is poised to make a marked increase. Even so, it's leaving no stone unturned in its quest to preach to – and convert – the masses. OnLive's newly unveiled Universal Controller provides access to content via "virtually all TVs and tablets. We're cross-compatible with pretty much everything, and have a USB dongle to plug into anything that isn't compatible [wirelessly]."

An aesthetic hybrid of 360 and PS3 pads, the Universal Controller is intended to be a super-accessible gateway to OnLive content more or less wherever there's a screen and an Internet connection. *Duke Nukem Forever* on the monitor at your desk at work? Sure. *FEAR 3* on your iPad? No problem.







The Universal Controller transforms a tablet into a setup capable of playing fully fledged versions of triple-A games via OnLive's cloud

The potential of the concept hasn't escaped game publishers, with Ubisoft integrating touch controls into the upcoming *From Dust* purely in order to accommodate OnLive's tablet functionality. More will follow.

The "any screen" mantra is proven to us first-hand with demonstrations on an iPad 2 and a Motorola Xoom. The Android-powered solution is still being polished, but both tablets provide seamless navigation of the OnLive service, allowing us to drop into any game immediately. As with other new gaming platforms such as 3DS, it's something that must be experienced in order to be properly appreciated. Using your iPad and a joypad to play triple-A titles should be enough of a lure to convince gamers to give it a try. ■

UP IN THE AIR
At Apple's WWDC, held during the same week as E3, Steve Jobs took to the stage to introduce iCloud. Apple's system stores content – email, contacts and iTunes included – and wirelessly sends it to your devices. The coincidental timing of the iCloud unveil didn't escape Bentley: "Yeah, it was bizarre. Apple does great products as well. Coincidentally, Dick Silverman is my VP of system engineering – he's the guy that designed the OnLive controller, the game module and also the Apple TV and Mighty Mouse. That's why we have great design."



Q&A


Joe Bentley
VP of engineering, OnLive

OnLive offers a variety of ways to pay for and play its content. The PlayPack bundle – which costs $10 per month for unlimited access to 60 titles – is a way to cut out the middleman and appeal to a wide, cost-conscious audience. Here, we dig deeper into the service.

How do you offer long-term value to consumers through your payment models when they can go to a retailer and buy a game for a one-off fee?
OnLive has subscriptions, rentals, PlayPacks and PlayPass, which is like owning it. The prices are affordable and every game has a free demo too. I'm also convinced PlayPack will continue to grow. Maybe it will all go that way, with thousands of titles all available for a flat fee. It's hard for game publishers to get their heads around this, because they don't know if they'll make or lose money and they're responsible to Wall Street and the bottom line. But I think for the consumer it's just about getting over the fact that you don't have the media in your hands.

Do you offer developers better value than the current platform holders?
We absolutely know we do. In a retail model you take a $60 title, the retailer gets a cut, you have to pay [Microsoft], Sony, Nintendo – everybody takes a cut out of it, then the problem is second-hand sales and piracy. There's no piracy here or second-hand sales – our games are already on digital distribution prices so run about $10 cheaper than retail, so we already have the advantage of a discount. I can't go into specifics on the cuts and margins, but they're getting a better deal from us.

What about the deal from the player's perspective?
If a guy's got to have *Duke Nukem* on launch, if he wants to pay $50, he can. If he doesn't have the money and is the kind of guy who likes to get a lot of titles cheaply, we have PlayPack – the all-you-can-eat buffet model. If you watch game sales, it turns out a lot of them drop off after two months, then they start throwing in DLC to keep it going. We have *Homefront* in the PlayPack – a top-tier multiplayer title coming in, a game that is only a few months old. Why is that happening? Because as the game curve comes off the top, with the PlayPack [developers] can get a longer lead by finding that other type of shopper who would normally go to the used bargain bin where they would get no cut out of it. The way we divide it up is game developers get paid depending on usage. Games in the PlayPack take a higher cut if they're used more.

If Sony or Microsoft offered you space on their online services, would you agree?
Absolutely. Our controller is a hybrid between a PS3 controller and an Xbox controller. It's all compatible, it would work. There are guys chatting about this, but we'll see where it goes. It would work, and we're ready to work with everybody. What people are realising is that everything could be a console, so why shouldn't you be able to take your game everywhere? I think the timing of this is perfect.

There's a fear that only those with the fastest connections will enjoy OnLive properly. Can mainstream broadband provide what it requires?
It's growing like crazy. Our three largest investors are the largest carriers in the world [including AT&T and BT]. These carriers understand growth and how they're building their networks. Since they're investors in OnLive, they have an interest in making sure this product is successful. We have discussions with their business and networking teams, helping them to understand our traffic, how it's changing. They're investing because the world is demanding more and more bandwidth, in the mobile market and 4G – people want to do things like watch films. The carriers have to figure out if they're going to put new fibre into the ground, how they can monetise it and get a return on the investment. They invest in companies such as OnLive because they may be able to provide a bundle including the service when a user upgrades to a 10Mb connection, or whatever it is, to help supplement the cost of putting the fibre down.

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



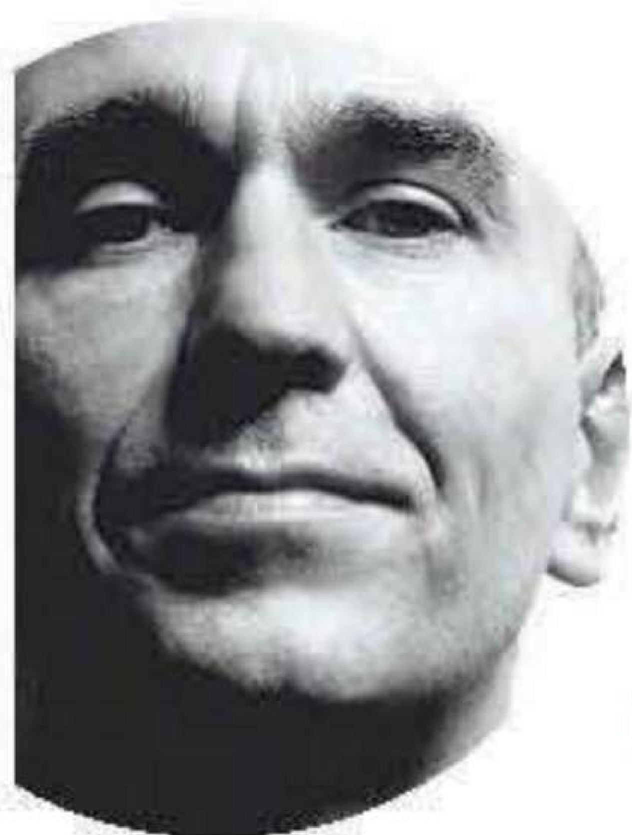
"I've now been to the Playboy Mansion! Woo! Not related to *Minecraft* at all, but I just wanted to share that. :D"

Markus 'Notch' Persson continues to boldly explore new frontiers



"I'm just going to keep calling it the NGP. Vita sounds like a drink you'd buy at a hippy bar."

Randy Pitchford of Gearbox reveals his drinking habits at E3



"We've got some great horse sweat technology to be reported on!"

But what will you be using it for, **Peter Molyneux**?



"Unleash the simulated family!"

Tim Schafer calls for his on-stage testers while showing off *Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster* during E3

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Elevator Action Death Parade
Manufacturer Taito

Elevator Action, the 1983 platform game from Taito, has received a modern makeover in a big way in *Elevator Action Death Parade*, which is now reaching UK arcades.

The original game's Agent 17 is joined by a female sidekick to infiltrate a mega-skyscraper being used to create mutated super soldiers. They blast their way through 100 floors, picking up hidden items such as extra lives, grenades and, in a nod to the original title, briefcases dropped by enemy agents. Players can pick their own route by selecting which floors the elevator visits.

More important than all of that, though, are the cabinet's mechanical doors that move back and forth to generate a genuine elevator-opening vibe.

Powered by Taito's Type X² hardware, the stylised combat has strong cinematic leanings, along with some unintentionally hilarious English voice dubbing. The game also throws in a bundle of end-of-level bosses, but the central action is less linear than what we usually associate with lightgun titles. A novel diversion all round, then.



XPERIA™ PLAY: IT'S ON

WIN SONY ERICSSON'S AWESOME, GAME-CHANGING NEW ANDROID™ SMARTPHONE PLUS A SMORGASBORD OF SONY AV KIT



The Xperia™ PLAY from Sony Ericsson is a new breed of smartphone, mixing PlayStation®-certified gaming and the latest Android™ functionality.

Whether you're a hardcore gamer, or just after a bit of time-killing fun, the Xperia™ PLAY is the ultimate gaming mobile. Heavy hitting developers such as EA, Gameloft, Glu and Digital Chocolate are all on board.

Six games are pre-loaded, including EA's FIFA 10 and the PlayStation® classic Crash Bandicoot. There are over 60 optimised games – and counting – available to buy online.

The Xperia™ PLAY has PlayStation®-certified gaming controls, including an innovative analogue pad, and 60fps hi-res graphics immerse you deeper in mobile gaming than any other device available.

To celebrate, we're giving away an Xperia™ PLAY with a selection of brand new Sony kit: a 46-inch Bravia EX723 Freeview HD telly with Wi-Fi web connectivity, a BDVE870 5.1-channel, Blu-ray home cinema system, four pairs of Sony active 3D glasses and the TD10E, the world's first full-HD, 3D camcorder.

For a shot, just answer this question.

Send a text to 87474 with JUST the coloured message beside your choice

eg XPERIAPLAY A

How big is the screen on the Xperia™ PLAY?

A 4 INCHES XPERIAPLAY A

B 4.2 INCHES XPERIAPLAY B

C 4.5 INCHES XPERIAPLAY C

TEXT 87474 OR GO TO WWW.T3.COM/S/XPERIA

RULES To enter you can either: (a) text your answer to 87474 at any time before August 20 2011 or (b) enter the competition online at the URL above before August 20 2011. By sending your text entry you agree to these competition rules. Answers must be received before August 20 2011. The winner will be selected at random from all correct entries received between the relevant dates and will be sent a set the prize free of charge. The winner will be notified within 28 days of the closing date and will be required to give details of a delivery address in the UK to which the prize should be sent. There is no cash alternative available. Normal certification restrictions apply. We reserve the right to substitute the prize for equal value depending on the nature of the prize. Only UK residents aged 16 years and over may enter this competition. No employees of Future plc or any of its group companies or the employees of any entity that has been involved with the administration of this competition or any member of their households may enter this competition. Texts will be charged at £1 plus your normal network tariff. By entering this competition, you consent to us using your personal details to send you information about products and services of Future which may be of interest to you. If you do not want to receive this information, please include the word STOP at the end of your text message.

My Favourite Game Joe Abercrombie

The author of brutal, brilliant fantasy The First Law Trilogy talks vintage gaming inspiration and playing until his fingers bled

Fantasy writer **Joe Abercrombie** grew up in Lancaster, UK, rolling dice and plugging away at an Acorn Atom, before venturing south to London where he worked as a film editor. His leap into fantasy writing came in 2006 with The First Law Trilogy (described by Pulitzer prize winner Junot Diaz as "the finest epic fantasy trilogy in recent memory"). While his professional career has zigged and zagged, one thing has remained constant: his love of videogames.

What's your earliest gaming memory?
We were one of the first families to have a computer – an Acorn Atom. It had 2K memory, which we later upgraded to a blistering 12K. There was a game called *Stargate Fighter* on the Atom. We played it so much we broke all the keys off the keyboard, leaving behind these naked metal bars with bits of razor-sharp solder on. Then we played on those, cutting our fingertips to bits. I've pretty much been obsessed with games ever since.

As a youngster, were you more drawn to console or PC gaming?
I wasn't hugely aware of consoles, but a friend had an Atari. What I remember playing on is the Acorn Atom, the BBC Model B and then a friend's Spectrum. We'd play *Way Of The Exploding Fist* and *Lords Of Midnight*. And on the BBC Model B, *Elite* was the big, big thing I played. But also text adventures – the whole lot. I suppose I was born and grew up at the time when videogames were just starting to become available and widespread. I've grown up with computer games my whole life.

FANTASY FACTS
Abercrombie's The Blade Itself has been published in more than 20 countries, with The First Law Trilogy selling over a million copies worldwide. His most recent book, The Heroes, was a bestseller shortly after release in January. He is a two-time nominee for the David Gemmel Legend Award, one-time nominee for the John W Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and one-time nominee for the British Fantasy Award.



Did you dabble in the arcade scene?
Much later, when I was heavily into *Street Fighter II*, I occasionally got my ass kicked by ten-year-olds in arcades [laughs].

Whose games do you follow?
BioWare has always been right up my street. I'm kind of a roleplaying and strategy gamer at heart, but I dabble widely. I loved *Baldur's Gate* and its sequels. I'm slightly disappointed by the way BioWare's made things simpler, but I understand why. However, *Mass Effect 2* was spectacular – the first game I've seen fuse that kind of action with RPG elements and a nice, hard edge. Rockstar is also hard to argue with – *Red Dead Redemption* [left] was stupendous, the best game for a long, long time. They always try something new.

"I can no longer play GTA: San Andreas for six days straight. That was before kids and a book deal"

Is there a parallel between the BioWare and Rockstar world-building games and your fantasy writing?
I suppose so, in a sense. I'm always more interested in characters than settings and what's interesting about BioWare is that, although obviously the world is fleshed out and detailed, it doesn't lose sight of the characters. It develops really strong characters in those games, which is very important. There's an emphasis on the dialogue which – although creaky at times – is better than a lot of games. Look at something like *God Of War* and how fruity and pompous it is. There's a lightness of touch about BioWare's stuff, which I think is rare and very valued.

Do you find it difficult to balance your writing and gaming time?
I have a period between 10:30pm and midnight most nights when I'll play. If I'm truly obsessed with a game, I'll usually find time in the day to cheekily play when I should be writing. I find time, but gone are the days when I played *GTA: San Andreas* for basically six days straight. That was before kids and a book deal.

Have games influenced your work?
Yes, I think they have, hugely. You're influenced by whatever you're into, or really not into. Computer games at times have had a big place in my heart. Certainly fantasy games such as *Dungeon Master* and early-'80s text adventures such as *Twin Kingdom Valley*. *TKV* still echoes in my head – you had to flesh out so much stuff with your imagination. A lot of the historic and strategic stuff – *Civilization*, *Total War* and *Age Of Empires* – got me interested in history. I think strategic thinking has a place in what I write. It's useful, you learn how important the high ground is if you play *Total War* a lot: go for the hills, man.

Favourite game of all time, then?
That's so tricky. How about one for each decade of my life? *Elite* from my childhood, *Dungeon Master* from teenage years, *SFII* from my 20s and *Red Dead Redemption* from recent history.

OK, now you have to choose just one.
Ooh… It's got to be *Dungeon Master*. ■



bit.ly/lmOujY
More of Joe Abercrombie's favourite gaming things

As well as discussing his writing work, Abercrombie also talks about his gaming life on his Web site at www.joeabercrombie.com

Lou Abercrombie



WEB SITE

C64 Endings
www.c64endings.co.uk
The '80s and early '90s may have been a good time to own a Commodore 64, but they were a bad time to be a perfectionist. Some save-free games rank alongside the most gruelling physical and mental challenges mankind has ever faced.

C64 Endings, which has been "completing and cataloguing Commodore 64 games since the very early days of our beloved machine", provides the pleasure of completing some of the worst offenders without any of the pain. The site is an archive of game endings with close to 400 video links and over 600 detailed descriptions and screenshots. Though a great many have been chronicled thanks to cheat codes, it's a valuable resource for those hoping to see the light at the end of some of gaming's darkest tunnels.



VIDEO

The Worst of E3 2011
bit.ly/l3798B
E3 is all about new games, correct? Well, here's one: how many cringing spasms can you successfully stifle while watching this montage of excruciatingly awkward E3 2011 lowlights? The parade of media briefings offered no shortage of gems: glitchy Kinect demos where the onscreen action appears wholly unrelated to the player's flailing limbs, wooden exclamations by child actors feigning enthusiasm, and the new low that is Ubisoft's Mr Caffeine ("Didd-i-loo, didd-i-loo, didd-i-loo!").

WEB GAME

Silly Sausage
www.nitrome.com/games/sillysausage/
The aesthetics and difficulty curve of *Bubble Bobble* collide with the gameplay of *Pac-Man* in *Silly Sausage*. You take command of a sausage, and navigate it to the finish line, avoiding contact with any of the nasties that come thick and fast as you clear each room. Levels need to be cleared of jewels to open the exit, transforming it into a game of thievery and escape. Controlling the sausage is tricky in itself; the arrow keys stretch your upper half while your feet remain planted in position. Let go of the arrow keys, and you snap back.

Silly Sausage is yet another example of Internet games' fascination with old-fashioned gaming and style, and as with the best products from this retro-fetish trend, it's immediate, bold and, of course, entirely silly.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A sprinkling of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**230

PERIPHERAL

Nyko Zoom for Kinect
Microsoft may not have wheeled out any new hardware at E3, but that didn't stop a thirdparty unveiling what looks to be an essential Kinect accessory. The Zoom, from manufacturer Nyko, reduces the space required to use Kinect by 40 per cent. By attaching the Zoom – a set of wide-angle, optical lenses that cover Kinect's – you can play Kinect titles without smashing your living room, or limbs, to bits. Without any need for calibration or advanced setup, it's convenient as well as innovative, and could prove instrumental in advancing Kinect's reach this year. Set to debut in the US for $30 next month, it's a heck of a lot cheaper than a new house, too.



continue

Handhelds
When is Microsoft going to come and join the fun?

Live orchestration
Zelda cues never sounded so regal

Storytelling
LA Noire tempts wives to take pads

In-N-Out Burger
Our shameful LA snack shack of choice

quit

HD editions
Where's the line drawn between revisionism and recycling?

QTEs
Killing the impact of E3 demos stone dead

Force-fed Kinect functionality
"Xbox. Stop"

Denny's
One day we'll tell you the Denny's story

TWEETS

If you're thinking of seeing the new PotC movie, might I suggest playing *Monkey Island* instead, although it's not in 3D.
@grumpygamer

The most poignant part of playing Wii is that it populates the games with Mii avatars, including one of my ex-girlfriend.
@themanwhofell

There's nothing like seeing your progress blocked by a car driven by cartoon version of your ex, with a giant head, to show you've moved on.
@themanwhofell

Who is going to break the news to the #e3 tweeters that they all sound like slobbering children?
@ibogost

Hackers have finally cracked the Sega Genesis i.imgur.com/TZ509.jpg
@FutureDave



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DISPATCHES AUGUST

Welcome to the part of the magazine assembled from the views of **Edge**'s readership and columnists old and new. Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue provides a forum for your views on *LA Noire*, the origins of Mario, Nintendo's Wii U, the new-look **Edge**, and the habit of stockpiling videogames. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** talks about why killing Osama Bin Laden wasn't a game, **Leigh Alexander** argues that gamers can be their own worst enemies in the search for legitimacy, and **Brian Howe** gets to grips with a futuristic Nintendo handheld.



next-gen.biz
Edge on the Web, with links to all of our online activity



Issue 229

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS



None more noir

I finished *LA Noire* last night, and this morning I read your review and discussion of it. It got me thinking, as I often do, of the relationship between films and games, this time in terms of genre adaptation. If you've not completed the game, stop reading now.

I love the noir genre. From the classics such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James M Cain, to more recent stuff such as Elmore Leonard and chief *LA Noire* inspiration James Ellroy. Needless to say, I loved the story. It's pulp in the best way – complex, morally ambiguous and gripping, despite working with familiar archetypes. Contrary to what your Post Script said, I actually liked knowing what Phelps was getting himself into, having to play along regardless gave me the sense of helpless inevitability that the plot entails – especially later on, as you stop controlling Phelps as the protagonist and start to feel him slip away...

And then there's the ending. The film adaptation of LA Confidential (another major touchstone) is rightly celebrated, but it fudged the book's ending. Changed it. Made it happier. Bad guys get done; good guys live. One even gets the girl and drives off into the sunset. Unlike the book, the film's ending was massively compromised. I was somehow expecting a similar cop-out in *LA Noire*, but it didn't happen at all – the bad guys win, our protagonist is destroyed, and greed and corruption are the victors.

Obviously there's more to the game than the plot – and some of its gameplay elements don't quite come together as well as they could – but I think the plot of *LA Noire* is hugely significant to the enjoyment of the game. And endings are important. They can either ruin something, undermining all that has gone before, or seal the deal and leave a lasting, emotional and intellectual impact.

Here's my point: *LA Noire* had the balls to stick to its noir roots. It should receive as much praise for this as LA Confidential did – more so, in fact. I don't think that James Ellroy plays games much, but even a curmudgeon like him would tip his fedora to Team Bondi and their understanding and respect for the genre. Something to celebrate then – games have succeeded (for once!) where films frequently fail.

Mark Oosterveen

Agreed, the game's writer/director Brendan McNamara deserves kudos for respecting his audience and not defaulting to a happily-ever-after conclusion. The inherent cynicism of *LA Noire*'s final moments feels much truer to the classic film noir template, which always favoured black and grey moral hues over their brighter counterpoints.

Labour day

As a subscriber, I was delighted when the latest issue of **Edge** arrived during the morning of June 9. The reason? My wife was due to be induced that afternoon with our second child and we had been warned to expect many hours – possibly days – before anything happened. Suddenly, the new iteration of **Edge** offered salvation (for me, at least) from the abyss of time that lay ahead.

As I was getting my bearings with the new, sleek design, I was intrigued by the diverse reactions that the subject of the magazine elicited from the traffic of people in such a busy environment. Several, upon assuming it was some sort of conventional lifestyle magazine after noticing the production quality, seemed horrified that its subject was games ("Oh, right... aren't they for kids?"). Conversely, and perhaps refreshingly, some of the more favourable reactions were offered from impressive sources: one consultant declared to his posse of registrars that gaming was his primary method of escape from the pressures of his profession, therefore implying that my gamer status was an example to defer to (that's how I explained it to my increasingly impatient and seemingly neglected wife, anyhow).

Once my mild irritation with the more negative reactions had dispersed, what became clear to me was, regardless of the quality of opinion proffered, the crucial factor was the fact that people had opinions about games: the industry is now part of the fabric of entertainment culture. Within such an unlikely environment, the numerous conversations stimulated by my copy of **Edge** were indicative of the sorts of interactions people have about their preferred choices of TV or film. The new design is reflective of this growing sense of identity within the industry. The distinct increase in the depth of writing, crisp layout and obvious production values mean that latest offering is now truly reflective of possibly the most dynamic form of entertainment available to consumers today.

So, for the record, two births were celebrated by me: **Edge** 4.0, symbolising the greater maturity of the games industry, and (eventually) a beautiful baby son. Just how much time I'll get to dedicate to my gaming over the next few years is another matter.

John Heffernan

Congratulations, John. Perhaps a 3DS will provide a decent distraction as you face up to the sleepless nights. And if any readers want to name their new arrivals **Edge** (what, it's worse than Apple?), we have more 3DSes to exchange for properly notarised proof.

Getting Jumpy

In David Sheff's book Game Over, there's an account of the creation of Jumpman:

"The engineers had taught Miyamoto that it was important to distinguish the

body so it would be visible on a videogame screen. Therefore he clothed his chubby character in bright-colored carpenter's overalls. [...] The engineers said it was difficult to accurately represent hair in a videogame because of inertia [...]. To avoid the problem, Miyamoto added a red cap."

The character design was significantly influenced by the problems posed by hardware limitations. Subsequent iterations of the character have of course retained fidelity to the original design; so the Mario we know today was largely determined by the capabilities of the *Radar Scope* cabinets repurposed to house *Donkey Kong* in 1981.

There's an obvious analogy for this phenomenon to be found in poetry and lyricism; when the artist's choice of words is limited to those that achieve the self-imposed formal requirement of rhyme. Further limitations set by the theme, emotion, and so on ensure that the words aren't just an arbitrary string of nonsense.



Rockstar's *LA Noire* was pitched perfectly, says Mark Oosterveen

To return to games, *Resident Evil 4* features many delightful examples of this 'rhyming' technique; although in this case, formal gameplay requirements rather than hardware restrictions shaped the content. One of them was a series staple: the typewriter providing pseudo-justification for the player's ability to save their progress. Another is the character of the Merchant, whose only role is to embody one important gameplay component: the trading and upgrading system.

Both of the above were lost in translation in *RE5*, dropped in favour of characterless checkpoints and menu screens, respectively. Another example (and I miss its absence in the Wii redux) is the laser-pointer affixed to virtually every weapon, be it a state-of-the-art US Secret Service handgun or a rustic villager's shotgun. You know it's just a barely-sensible way to politely implement what would otherwise be a superimposed aiming reticule, and that's part of the delight.

James Leach, in his column in **E**229, wrote: "Some of the best movie-making bends or even breaks [traditional storytelling] rules and makes a virtue of doing so. This doesn't happen in games." I'm not sure that the latter part of the statement is categorically true, but there's a distinction here that lends itself to the same analogy; the distinction between works that take traditional storytelling 'rules' for granted (as though they were technical restrictions like the ones that shaped Mario), and those that break with them and invent their own rules, their own rhyme justified by their own reason.
Alex Hannigan

Mixed reviews

While I'm often one of the last to complain when it comes to design changes (as opposed to the screaming masses that throw a fit whenever Facebook musters the courage to create an excuse to give its designers something to do), something about **Edge** 4.0 really bothers me. On the whole I'm impressed by the direction you've chosen to go in, and the paper quality (as you're quick to mention) is absolutely glorious.

One consultant said gaming was his method of escape from the pressures of his profession

But one thing I simply cannot forgive is the omission of the explanation of your scoring system. For the entirety of my **Edge** readership I've been completely reliant on it to make sense of the symbol that you assign to each game. As a result of your redesign I've been forced to keep an old copy of **Edge** by me whenever I take the (now treacherous) journey into the review section in order to decipher the score at the end of each review.

While finding out that *El Shaddai* was an 'eight' was certainly worth the effort, the same can't be said for some of the other games you reviewed, and presumably some of the games you will take it upon yourselves to review.

I urge you to put an end to my seemingly endless need for cross-checking and to reinstate the explanation of your scoring system to the pages of your magazine.
Daoud Al-Janabi

D'oh. We'd hoped you had it memorised by now. Thanks to everyone who wrote in with feedback on the new look, incidentally. To help us further, while also getting the chance to land a pretty hefty prize, share more of your thoughts via www.futuresurvey.com/biggames (password: BG4). ■

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to the topics we invite you to discuss on our Web site at next-gen.biz and our Facebook page.

On Nintendo's Wii U

I want to know if this controller will have a controller?
Richard Matthias, via Facebook

If you can use Vita as a controller for PS3 – which I believe you can – Sony will beat this to the market place and potentially offer the same functionality. Except you can take Vita anywhere and it'll still work. I don't see anything here a Vita + PS3 combo couldn't do.
James Hurrell, via Facebook

I think this looks great and genuinely believe that Microsoft and Sony will inevitably end up playing catch-up. The potential for this to revolutionise game design is huge. I have a feeling FPSs with no HUD will become de rigeur in the future and we will ask, "How did we ever put up with it?"
Mattyboy, via Edge's comments section

On stockpiling games

I'm not going to go into all the games I've never started but, for example, I have a copy of *The Minish Cap* still in its cellophane, a copy of *Majora's Mask* that has never seen the inside of a Nintendo 64 and a copy of *Steel Battalion* whose controller I've never even assembled. One day, maybe.
Sordel, via Edge's forum

On my shelf are six titles still in their wrap and untouched. Worse, I have all the DLC episodes and suchlike for these titles ready to go. God, I need to be unemployed and single again!
Knowlesy, via Edge's forum



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

How does the taking of Bin Laden compare to the onscreen activities of the modern gamer?

News just in at the time of writing: speculative venture capitalist and 'hater of our freedoms' behind telegenic acts of mass murder shot in the face by Navy SEALs flying stealth helicopters into a secret compound next door to Pakistan's main military academy. Target's mangled face identified using secret 'face recognition' software; body dumped in the ocean. Nothing to see here; move along.

Not exciting enough? Now you can play it yourself. The news that the shooting in the face – or what a friend of mine took to calling the 'very brief capture' – of Osama Bin Laden was almost instantaneously turned into a downloadable *Counter-Strike* map seemed to me a heartwarming demonstration of the creative irreverence of the videogaming world.

If Barack Obama had really wanted to take the nephritically challenged Christopher Lee lookalike alive, the president should have demanded that the SEALs be armed with guns featuring those videogame-style reticules that turn into an X when you point them at someone you're not allowed to shoot, disabling your trigger for good measure. (Human nature being what it is, whenever I get such a reticule I start pumping the trigger hysterically, so that when, without warning, I am suddenly granted shooting privileges again, I find myself spinning round in an unsurgical frenzy of 'happy firing', the joyous loosing-off of AK-47 ammunition that traditionally accompanies Afghan weddings, sometimes with tragic results.)

If taking Osama Bin Laden 'dead or alive, or, you know, dead' in his mazelike Abbottabad 'lair' had really been a videogame – as implied by the Photoshopped pictures that quickly circulated of Obama watching the raid while holding an Xbox controller – the cadaverous white-robed boss would hardly have just been standing there unarmed in the final room. He would have been surrounded by hundreds of explosive wives and children, rolling fast towards the player in earthshaking waves, while the big man himself beamed orange incendiary lasers from those haunted deep-set eyes and occasionally spin-attacked around the room like some pirouetting razor-bearded maniac on fast-forward.

> I can't wait for the game that has you 'kettle' a crowd of peaceful anti-cuts demonstrators

Compared with such dramatic possibilities, the reality disappointed, as it so often does: indeed, as the official story morphed and corrected itself, the mission to kill or capture (or, you know, kill) Bin Laden seemed increasingly tawdry and one-sided. What Navy SEALs are tasked to do in real life is not much like what they do in videogames. (For a start, in games you are always part of a small squad facing massive numbers of hostiles: in reality, commanders prefer to establish a scenario in which you are part of an overwhelming force.) But the whole episode, with its refreshingly impious *Counter-Strike* coda, might also cause us to reflect anew on how what one might call 'national-security ideology' is uncritically internalised in so many videogames today.

Take *Splinter Cell: Conviction*. Periodically throughout the game you meet a person you are not allowed to shoot (hello, white-X reticule) but must instead 'interrogate', basically so that you know which door to go through next. Pressing B in response to the repeated onscreen prompts to 'interrogate' each such person results in your character performing various acts of close-up violence: smashing a guy's face into a desk; pinning him against a wall and choking him; kneeing him in the stomach, and so forth. This kind of thing is what the Bush-Cheney administration called 'enhanced interrogation techniques'; or, in other words, torture.

Of course we are not meant to take these scenes in *Splinter Cell* seriously: the torturee's symbolic role is merely that of a malfunctioning vending machine which needs to be slapped a few times with the action button so that it dispenses the appropriate informational token. And one is hardly going to weep for these characters, given the hundreds of others one mercilessly necksnaps or headshots. But it's the very fact that such 'interrogation' scenes are so automatic and unproblematised that reveals how deeply the game is immersed – or, to use an appropriate buzzword about the relationship between war and the media, embedded – in national-security ideology: the proposition that, when it comes to anything that can be labelled 'terrorism', any and all behaviour is not only acceptable but morally necessary.

The Bin Laden boss might have been defeated, but national-security ideology is always on the lookout for a new monster. The British police now keep tabs on a category of citizens called 'domestic extremists': not obsessive vacuumers and washers-up, but activists for various causes who have never committed any violent action. Videogames can surely learn from these developments to create exciting new fantasy justifications for violence. Personally, I can't wait for the game that has you 'interrogate' campaigners for animal rights and gay marriage, or 'kettle' a crowd of peaceful anti-cuts demonstrators. After all, you never know: they might be about to turn into zombies.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

How gamers are going the wrong way about securing the approval they crave from society

Are games art? Just kidding – this isn't another one of those articles. There sure have been a lot, though, right? The issue of art, and whether games are or aren't it and blah blah blah, has captivated gamers, developers and the press to the point that it's practically a punchline, yet that doesn't stop people from trotting the issue out.

In games' long struggle to gain ground against public perception challenges, the mantle of art has been the best way to dress up the conversation, to enforce that games were grown-up, to hammer home their cultural value. Problem was, applying the word heavily and too eagerly to a still-maturing medium was like throwing a silk tablecloth on top of a bachelor's mess: it birthed endlessly circular arguments on definitions, on the word 'art' itself most of all. Even storied film critic Roger Ebert participated (and probably regrets it now, poor guy).

That's partly because when people bang on about 'art', the word they really want is 'legitimacy'. If art is some lofty and meaningful thing, capable of permanent value to its culture, and if games can be part of that, then no one will misunderstand or make fun of us any more. I mean, really, that's all it's about: if we're having a dialogue about the semantics of art and interaction design instead of about headshots and screenshots then it means we are now cool and adult and important, and not at all stereotypical basement wankers thank you very much.

The relative frequency with which videogames are apparently misinterpreted by our concept of the culture at large – even now when they're part of a multi-billion-dollar business, to say nothing of the days when our scope was much narrower – makes all this needy grasping for legitimacy somewhat understandable, at least in theory. There's increasingly less sympathy for the idea of the niche, marginalised gamer now that we're in the iPhone and Facebook era and everyone plays, but it's fair to say the wider public's understanding of the medium's depth and breadth remains a frustratingly narrow one.

> When people bang on about 'art', the word they really want is 'legitimacy' for videogames

The whole 'art thing' has reared its head again in recent months because of a string of new developments: the US government's National Endowment for the Arts has agreed that games are eligible for art funding grants, the Smithsonian Museum now has an exhibit devoted to the history of games, and New York's Tribeca Film Festival honoured Rockstar and Team Bondi's *LA Noire* with a showing at the event – the first time a game's been included.

When the government, a renowned art museum and a significant film festival all tip their hat to the art and craft of games, it's no small thing for fans of a medium that's always been seen as a plaything, a lesser form of entertainment or a harmful waste of time. But weirdly, the way gamers react to these kinds of developments in the dignity of games perception, the ways they choose to level their focus, is almost as backward as the views of those they see as enemies of the games.

Following NEA's announcement that 'digital games' would be eligible for funding as part of a newly expanded Arts in Media category, mainstream headlines were breathless, as if videogames had been certified, by official decree, to be art. The unfortunate thing was that the gaming press did the same: US Government Declares Games Are Art, they said; It's Official. The Escapist even used the word 'legally' in its headline, just in case you had doubts.

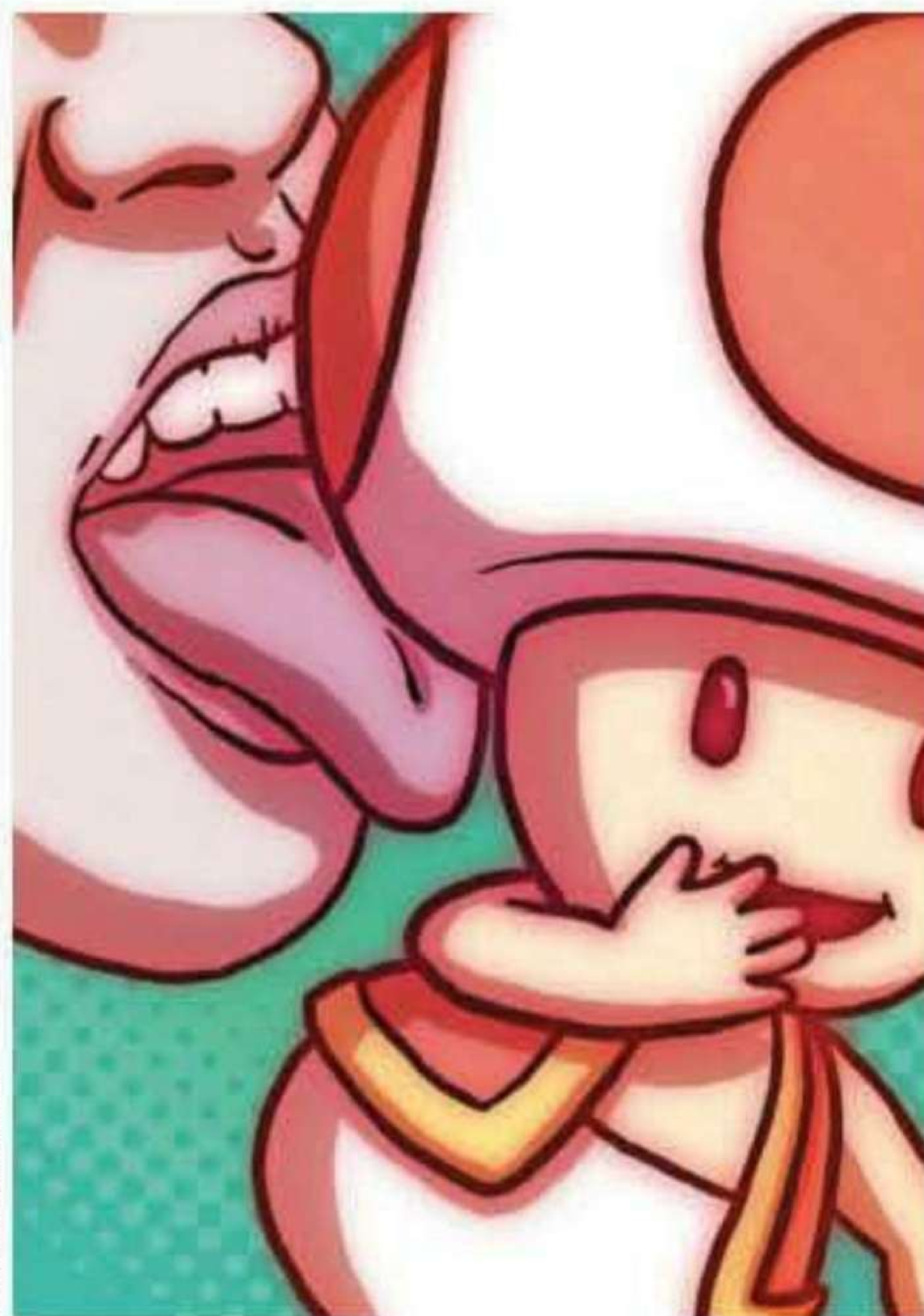
The fact that the NEA only funds non-profit, tax-exempt organisations – it's not like anyone is validating *BioShock* with a signed cheque, or even funding a worthy indie – was largely ignored, and so was the question of how interactive entertainment can serve the art landscape.

So were questions like these: does bureaucratic validation make videogames any more relevant or mature? What do videogames gain from being recognised by film critics? Why was the Smithsonian exhibit curated primarily by public vote, the way fansites run their year-end polls?

Would we not know what to strive for, or how to identify ourselves if this discussion were ever put to rest? All this time, it's been 'us versus them', and we've fought the battle by gabbing ourselves hoarse about all the rare and beautiful moments in big-budget videogames that glimmer with the promise of transcendental experiences. Deep down, maybe we know we've been a little heavy-handed, albeit out of necessity. If gamers were 'valid', if we were not persecuted, wouldn't we have to take a hard look at videogames and all of the ways our activist priority hasn't allowed us to admit they let us down?

Wherever you look, others are welcoming games to the table. Now, the biggest enemy of legitimacy for videogames isn't 'others' any more. It's us.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

This mysterious report, bearing a 2014 datestamp, arrived in the **Edge** inbox

When the 3DS came out several years ago, we had a hard time imagining how it could be bettered – as, apparently, did Nintendo. We all remember the controversy that ensued when the WarioLeaks website posted internal Nintendo documents describing the '1DS', which Nintendo scrapped after gamers organised a massive online protest – for good reason, as the almost imperceptibly thin device would have required special tools and a jeweller's loupe to play. Fortunately, Nintendo quickly corrected course and announced plans for the 4DS. We obtained several test units of the astonishing hardware for this exclusive preview.

We audibly gulped with emotion as we unfolded the 4DS like a matte-black lotus flower and discovered it to be equipped with four screens. You don't even have enough eyes to look at that many screens at once. There's a traditional display, an autostereoscopic 3D display, a touchscreen and the new lickscreen, which is tongue-operated. This interface continues Nintendo's proud tradition of making its handhelds as stigmatising as possible to play in public. That said, in one of the launch titles we tested, *Willy Wonka In The Fourth Dimension*, the snozzberries tasted just like snozzberries. But the quadscreen setup is the least striking of the novelties packed into this device.

The 4DS augments games with an array of physical effects, which the launch titles go out of their way to showcase. In *Shaun White's Ultra-Mega Snowboard Avalanche Shred Party*, a Freon-powered AC unit makes the system feel icy cold and blows arctic air into your face. Sources inside Nintendo tell us that lickscreen compatibility was abandoned when a playtester's tongue froze to the screen. A built-in heater makes the desert regions of *Prince Of Persia: Still Climbin'* feel more authentic – though you'll need to connect an auxiliary petrol tank, sold separately. More remarkable still are the imperceptible grilles along the bottom edge of the system, which continually release a fine dusting of sand, bringing the gritty texture of the desert to wherever you are – which hopefully isn't in bed. Where does all that sand come from? Will we need refill cartridges? Given Nintendo's notoriously tight grip on its proprietary tech, we may never know.

> A gamer could survive in the wilderness indefinitely with a 4DS and Cooking Mama

It should be noted that not all 4DS launch titles push the envelope quite so vigorously. Some take a more timid approach, falling back on predictable strobe lights and force feedback. *Harry Potter And The Bucket Of Mystery* and *Lego Requiem For A Dream* both rely more on their licensed properties than forward thinking. At least the latter makes creative use of the touchscreen as you use the stylus to help an emaciated Lego Jared Leto carve up some "really pure horse". Other titles include remakes with 4D effects grafted on, sometimes to spectacular effect. An ingenious water dispersion system utilising Swedish showerhead technology has leak, squirt and mist settings, making remakes of *BioShock*, *Super Mario Sunshine* and *Heavy Rain* literally immersive – and refreshing. Again, we worry about refill carts, plus mildew. However, Nintendo issued a press release recently claiming that a gamer could survive in the wilderness indefinitely with nothing but a 4DS and a copy of *Cooking Mama*.

Some developers got a bit carried away. When battling the fire-breathing, poison-gas-farting character Earthquake in *Samurai Shodown 4D*, you'll want to turn the 4D slider all the way down. At its highest level, hidden nozzles in the device's casing emit gouts of flame up to two metres high, and the stench – the system administers odours and tastes via airborne pheromones – triggered bouts of uncontrollable retching, making us nostalgic for the good old '3D headache' of yesteryear. Also, the tiny bullets and blinding lasers bombarding us during *Metroid: Emo M* are downright hazardous. Facial lacerations aside, we had to keep playing these titles thanks to the truncated launch lineup. *Kingdom Hearts Death By Smiling: 1,298x13* was cancelled when its title aroused suspicions that its developers had actually gone mad. Worse, Rockstar pulled the plug on *Grand Theft Harvest Moon* when a coder was caught developing a Hot Coffee-like minigame, with lickscreen functionality so lewd we can't even print a description.

You could identify potential *Samurai Shodown* multiplayer opponents simply by looking for screen-licking, eyebrow-less people who smell like poison gas, but there is an easier way, as the StreetPass functionality introduced by the 3DS returns with a 4D overhaul. When two of our playtesters passed each other in the corridor with *Pokémon Raw Umber* in both of their systems, a level-one Squirtle automatically battled a buffed Diglett. When it seemed that all was lost, the loser's 4DS fired a throat dart that took the winner in the neck and dropped him cold. The last gamer standing took his opponent's 4DS, and then ran like the wind; the palpable wind of a brave new dimension.

Brian Howe writes about music, books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Paste

#230



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

A few threes from E3

Considering how increasingly good developers are becoming at weaving scripted thrills into their games, hiding new releases behind prerendered teasers is beginning to feel like false modesty. It was *Call Of Duty* that originally defined the modern, set-piece-driven FPS, for instance, and the *Modern Warfare 3* demo that opened Microsoft's E3 conference this year offered a textbook example of the series' familiar, choreographed thrills. The *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (p58) demo, meanwhile, saw Naughty Dog take advantage of a cargo ship setting to construct a typically elaborate escape sequence for hero Nathan Drake, who careered between multiple near-death experiences.

But is freedom being sacrificed for the sake of immaculately timed explosions? *Far Cry 3* (p54) promises us an open-world island to explore, but even its demo was built around the scripted capture and escape of its protagonist. This was, in part at least, no doubt a reflection of the need to make a strong debut showing. But after the unscripted nature of *Far Cry 2* left many players cold – or even worse, bewildered – it's easy to imagine Ubisoft's second sequel moving a little more frequently between that game's freedom and missions which take you more firmly by the hand.

Meanwhile, thatgamecompany's *Journey* (p66) may use flurries of wind and sand to steer players who try to wander off track back on the right course, but by dropping you in an empty desert, and giving you no objective other than to head for a mountain in the distance, it avoids feeling constrained. Indeed, its focus is almost entirely on the ad-hoc interactions between you and your co-traveller, and it enables the two of you to set your own pace when exploring the sands. Thatgamecompany might be known for its relaxing, near-therapeutic titles such as *Cloud, Flow* and *Flower*, but its secret may lie in reassuring players that they're not being dragged along for a ride.

MOST WANTED

Aliens: CM 360, PC, PS3, Wii U
With *Duke* finally out the door, Gearbox turns its attention to another often seen, rarely heard title. Fourplayer drop-in co-op is the main draw, but who isn't most keenly anticipating the marines' arrival via the Wii U incarnation?

Serious Sam 3: BFE 360, PC, PS3
"No cover. All man" may be the tagline to beat this year. If the game delivers on the E3 trailer's promise of a more gritty urban setting, we're in for irresistible mayhem. Croteam's disregard for realism should be the perfect antidote to *Modern Warfare* fever later this year.

Street Fighter III: Third Strike Online Edition 360, PS3
Pre-match button checks are among Capcom's tributes to the competitive scene that kept *Third Strike* alive for over a decade. Newcomers get tutorials and challenges and are eventually asked to repeat Daigo Umehara's legendary parry of Justin Wong's 15-hit Super Art at the Evolution tournament in 2004.

HYPE

BATTLEFIELD 3

DICE's military FPS gets a live fire test as we take on every last tango in Paris

Format	360, PC, PS3
Publisher	EA
Developer	DICE
Origin	Sweden
Release	October 25



The breadth of available vehicles sees jets and boats rejoining the series' staple tanks. E3's singleplayer presentation showed off a US armour column trundling across an Iranian desert; the tank interiors extensively modelled and animated, too





Though the different classes' more idiosyncratic skills are still more suited to particular environments, the level of customisation means that an engineer without a tank is not without hope in the twisty Métro tunnels

BELOW **The US marines' patter and squad tactics aim for authenticity – with former SAS man Andy McNab consulting with the developers to bring an air of credibility to the mission structure, weapon handling and motion capture**





Combining the old medic skillset with the new assault class is a smart move. Even though *Bad Company 2* made the medic an attractive proposition (thanks to an overpowered M60), it was really just defibrillators attached to a surplus class

If *Battlefield* was looking to pitch the *Call Of Duty* franchise from its throne, following the clumsy *Black Ops* and publisher Activision's crises in studio management, now would be the time. But if *Battlefield* was looking to do that, you wouldn't get assuredly non-combative executive producer **Patrick Bach** to say so.

"Honestly, we're not trying to go after *COD*," he says. "Of course there will be a crossover – it's a firstperson shooter, it's modern-day, and there are resemblances in locations, even – we're all inspired by the same media and the world around us. But to be a star you need to play your own songs."

Nonetheless, DICE is quick to capitalise on the announcement of *Call Of Duty*'s forthcoming Elite subscription service – quickly unveiling DICE's own stat-tracking social platform, Battlelog, with one feature doubly underscored: it's entirely free. And *Battlefield 3* is certainly doing some other things which will court *COD* fans – offering simplified team deathmatch, a sumptuous scripted singleplayer campaign, and ten bespoke twoplayer co-op missions. Even as these temptations are added to *Battlefield*, however, Bach stresses that its traditions – teamplay, objectives, vehicles and classes – are far from being sidelined. Indeed, they are the stars of the show as we blast through a medium-sized multiplayer level set in Paris.

We play the attackers here – a US force pushing through Russian occupiers, who've set up anti-air defences around their HQ at the Paris Stock Exchange. Where the French have gone remains a mystery, and although the details of *Battlefield 3*'s plot are under wraps, it's clear from the Russian invasion of France that it is avoiding real-world conflicts – no doubt a direction validated by the furore over *Medal Of Honor*'s recreation of Afghanistan. "Our goal isn't to make controversy," says Bach. "Authentic and real don't have to be the same thing."

So it is that *Battlefield 3* marries a bombastic and improbable tale of globe-trotting chaos with the credible jargon and skull-shaking shellshock of a more documentarian approach. The two sides of this are exemplified in the multiplayer level, Operation Métro: a showcase for the game's vivid combat, roaring sonic fidelity and hyper-real beauty. As the US force, we start in parkland nestled in the heart of Paris – its rolling grassy knolls enclosed by swaying red-leafed birch trees, its sparkling waterways and lakes spanned by quaint white brick bridges. Birdsong fills the air, and the sky's bright and clear all the way to the Eiffel Tower – until a



Semper free

Battlelog's finer details are still being determined, but here is what Bach was able to tell us: "It's a combination of a social platform and a persistence tracking system together with a pre- and post-game activity platform. We've been spending a lot of energy and time [on building it] – it's a huge investment, really, so our goal is to have a monthly fee of zero."

One in the eye for *COD*? Not quite, as Activision has since clarified that most of Elite's features will also be free, with its premium subscription entitling players to DLC and access to a Web TV show.

You won't be able to raze the entire city. "It's very hard to do it in a successful way," says Bach. "We funnel the player to make sure we give the right experience. Some buildings can be taken down completely and some will still have structures standing to create a maze"

jet sears across it, only to explode and pirouette madly into the urban skyline beyond the park's walls. Clearly, we'll have to do something about those AA guns.

This is Rush mode – a gametype familiar to *Battlefield* veterans in which an attacking force fights to plant bombs at two key points on the map, known as MCOM stations. Once these are destroyed, the map opens up another section with a further two MCOM stations, and then another and then another. What's remarkable about Operation Métro is how each push forward feels dramatically distinct, starkly altering not just the setting but also the tactics required to conquer it. Here in the park, with its wide spaces and clumps of foliage, our assault troops power forward with M16s while the recon class keep them covered from the treeline with MK11 sniper rifles – the prescriptive loadouts selected purely for this hands-on, but which will be hugely customisable in the final game. An APC rumbles up, attended to by an engineer as its turrets tear up the enemy's incongruous fortification of a bandstand.

The enemy are quickly pushed back, and the first MCOM stations detonated (we suspect that the QA team playing the Russian forces may have been told to give us an easy time). US jets sweep in across the park to deliver an almighty payload to its eastern wall, blowing two gigantic holes through to the Métro tunnels beneath. Suddenly, we descend from the cordite-smogged expanses of the park into narrow warrens of flickering strip lights. A burning train blocks the rails, forcing the swarm of US troops to choose between a handful of chokepoints, each with their own dangers. Sidling along the platform's edge





BATTLEFIELD 3



puts you right in a killzone, while winding through corridors invites a close encounter with a shotgun. Crawling through the shattered train keeps you covered from the concourse, but is perilously slow.

Coming to the fore in these standoffs is the support class, here wielding a gun capable of filling the air with lead at short notice. In order to keep its accuracy in check, however, it must be mounted, either by setting on a piece of nearby scenery or by going prone. Laying down fire now disrupts the vision and hearing of the opposition, making it harder for them to simply pop out of cover and headshot their assailant. It's not the only new visual effect to create significant tactical changes: a flashlight attachment can be used to disorient and blind enemies up close – particularly useful in the twisting, tight corridors, giving you a split second to dodge and land a knife blow.

Another significant change is the absence of a medic class. Healing skills have instead been folded into the assault loadout, with your frontline soldiers now able to deploy medkits and defibrillate fallen comrades. The latter takes longer than in previous games, making it trickier for groups of embedded soldiers to continuously revive themselves under heavy assault. It also now gives you the opportunity to decline resuscitation – in previous *Battlefield* games, over-enthusiastic medics could be a burden as much as a boon.

"It's been a constant complaint from the community," says **Lars Gustavsson**, lead multiplayer designer and 12-year franchise veteran. "People either get resurrected when they want to choose another class, or they get hammered by a tank but keep on getting revived by a medic hiding behind a rock."

Declining revival proves a handy get-out from the Métro's subterranean bottlenecks, allowing us to respawn and probe other routes of attack until we find a weakness and drive it home. Pushing through the platform and up the escalators sees the battle spill out on to the concourse – an open space which the defenders can cover from the other side of the ticket barriers. The engineer has the space to deploy his RPG here, taking out pockets of resistance, while assault troops dash for the MCOM stations that flank the arena. Soon, largely thanks to coy reluctance on the part of the QA team, we force our way out on to the Parisian streets, making the final rush towards the stock exchange. Suddenly there's a vertical dimension to account for, with fire rattling down from the buildings that border the tight alleys. We leave the cover of an abandoned vehicle to make a dash for a doorway, only to see the entire facade of the building above peel off and throw itself at us in a hiss of dust.

It's the first time in the level that *Battlefield*'s much-vaunted destruction has been used to any considerable effect, either visual or tactical. As dramatic as this instance is, there's a feeling that destruction, rather than being a central tenet around which the other mechanics organise, has been demoted to being one of many tools DICE uses to orchestrate the action. *Bad Company* and its sequel specialised in maps made up of isolated structures, and it was perhaps easier to plan for their destruction than it is in a dense urban environment where the player's route must be carefully contained.

> ***"Our goal isn't controversy. Authentic and real don't have to be the same thing"***

It certainly looks the business, though, and the final stage of Operation Métro is a showcase for this sort of mayhem, with the streets rapidly filling with plumes of smoke, rubble and dust. It's hard to keep track of the sight-lines here, as the assault takes us on to an exposed thoroughfare below the steps of the stock exchange. Defenders weave among cars, but careful covering fire from the now US-occupied buildings keeps them at bay while the final charges are set.

The experience is a dizzying, breathless one, taking the clever interplay of classes and dynamic destruction for which *Battlefield* is known and melding it with set-piece spectacle across four acts. It's also proof that *Battlefield* isn't compromising as it chases the bigger numbers – instead supplementing its offering with massmarket lures. Bach may not be one for fighting talk, but it's clear *Battlefield* won't be pulling any punches. ■

Q&A
Lars Gustavsson
Lead multiplayer designer



Are there conflicting needs between single- and multiplayer in terms of what the engine needs to be able to do?
Definitely. Singleplayer and multiplayer both have their own needs, but in the end I feel it's utterly important that it feels like the same game. There's no better way of proving your singleplayer run-and-gun experience than seeing what it feels like against a live human opponent. But we're more than willing to make differences to deliver the best experience in each. For example, in multiplayer, we do an additional pass for animation. In singleplayer you don't mind if a guard up on a balcony does a Hollywood death – stumbling around a bit before falling over. In multiplayer it needs to be a one-to-one correlation between action and result.

A striking thing about the Paris level is the way it radically changes the shape of the battlefield in each of its stages.
If people walk away from that level having been surprised – "Is that where we're going? Will we really do that?" – those reactions make me really happy. It's all about a journey – like Lord Of The Rings: now we go into Mordor!

The Paris map could almost be three or four different levels.
Exactly. There's nothing preventing us, if people had the time and the will, we could probably do a ten-base Rush map!

Do you have a plan for how the environments shape gameplay and which classes that benefits?
Battlefield games are always hard to balance, since for different locations different kits have advantages. This time, with the gun attachments and upgrades, you can easily adjust to the location you are in. The challenge is to ensure that our telemetry data shows that all classes are equally used across the whole map.

***Bad Company 2*'s complex tactics seemed to go over some people's heads, and they just stood at the back sniping.**
We're still in pre-alpha, so there are a lot of things you haven't seen today. But for them, it's part of an educational package. Nothing of this is set, but it could be anything from instructional videos to a lot of additional aiding systems in order to let people really know what it's all about. I think our work with the *Bad Company* franchise on console, and what that makes you do when it comes to context-sensitive systems, it made for a smarter and well-thought-through design. Hopefully we'll reel in the Chewbaccas!



LEFT **Level geometry is made up of layers – some trivial elements react directly to bullet impacts, allowing you to shred facades and thin walls with a spray of lead, while the larger structures beneath crumble in more prescribed fashion, their canned animations concealed by the dynamic detritus**



RIGHT **The support class is an easy favourite for static defenders – those on the trot may find it a tad inaccurate. The engineer meanwhile (far right) is a more ambiguous class; the weaponry selected for our play session didn't seem to have the close-quarters bias of *Bad Company 2*'s shotty-loving engineers. The RPG did prove handy for clearing out entrenched machine gunners, though**



Design showcase

Beneath the phenomenal draw distances and fine geometric detail is the Frostbite 2 engine – the result of a change of development strategy at DICE.



ABOVE **Author and former SAS soldier Andy McNab providing motion-capture data for the game.**
RIGHT **Defibrillating someone puts them in a down-but-not-out state, from which they can fire a handgun while considering their fate: fight on or respawn.**
BELOW **The scale and detail of environments that *Battlefield 3* turns out are simply staggering, but it's the lighting and atmospheric post-processing effects which make the locations so credible**





ABOVE **Bach talks of the new engine's capacity for emotion – drawing believable faces is key to instilling camaraderie with your AI cohorts**







bit.ly/jwwDuP
bit.ly/mof58e
More DICE interviews

Maybe blood really is thicker than water. Ryu Hayabusa returns, but instead of fighting archfiends and other supernatural beasts he'll be facing mostly human enemies. And you know what that means: buckets of blood

H | Y
P | E

NINJA GAIDEN 3

With his new focus on swordplay, Ryu is cutting up the rulebook

Format	360, PS3
Publisher	Tecmo Koei
Developer	In-house (Team Ninja)
Origin	Japan
Release	2012



bit.ly/lrpDuH
Extended Yosuke Hayashi interview





NINJA GAIDEN 3

Ryu Hayabusa has lived a strange life, even for a ninja. Over the course of his many blood-soaked exploits he's battled demons, killer skeletons, chainsaw zombies, warlocks and lightning gods. He has travelled around the world and beyond, slashing his way through volcanoes, mystical temples and underworld hell-dimensions. And yet, with *Ninja Gaiden 3*, the developers at Team Ninja seem to be more concerned with the basics – the mission we play during our E3 demo is entirely concerned with fighting regularly-armed soldiers on an everyday London street.

The demo begins with an exposition-heavy flashback, after which we cut to Ryu standing on top of a building, looking down on a group of soldiers below. With a button-press he glides down to street level, making short and bloody work of the armed men who populate the area. Combat is a fairly fluid mix of heavy and strong hits, but attacks are frequently broken up by QTEs and, as a result, never quite manage to achieve a smooth flow.

In something of a *Ninja Gaiden* perennial, the camera seems problematically sluggish – something which becomes apparent whenever Ryu must perform a QTE to dodge under trucks or around objects in the environment: the sequences frequently leaving us disoriented and unsure where to go next. In order to address this problem, a click of the right thumbstick has been mapped to automatically point the camera towards Ryu's next destination. It's a useful tool, albeit one that wouldn't be needed with clearer, more streamlined level design.

After a wall-climbing sequence, Ryu dives from a second rooftop, engaging in a few more QTEs while in the air. After we've sliced through another group of soldiers, *Ninja Gaiden 3* introduces a gameplay element absent from the series so far – stealth. As Ryu makes his way through a curtain of fog, he is able to slowly creep up behind his enemies and silently disembowel them. It's a simple enough mechanic, and apparently not one that the game will rely on too heavily.

"For this game, we're trying to make [Ryu] a Japanese dark hero," says Team Ninja producer **Yosuke Hayashi**. "We want to have the player feel like he is a ninja, so we're offering up some different kinds of actions that go along with that theme. We're not trying to be *Splinter Cell* or *Metal Gear*," he says. "Stealth is just in there as an accent."

Several short battles and QTEs later, Ryu faces off with a boss that launches volleys of rockets and machine-gun fire from its constantly rotating head. To dispatch it, Ryu must attack the glowing weak joints in its legs, hammering on the attack button until they explode. With the boss felled, we click the right thumbstick one more time to reorient the camera, and the demo ends.

"We want to have the player feel like a ninja, but we're not trying to be Metal Gear"

There's time to tighten the camera and controls, of course, and Team Ninja promises the combat system will expand beyond the QTE-punctuated combos seen here. At this point, though, *Ninja Gaiden 3* marks a change in the feel of the series. Forget about the superlative speed-combos of recent genre high-water marks like *Bayonetta*: *Ninja Gaiden 3*'s biggest challenge appears to be providing something new while retaining the savage grace of its predecessors. ■



The consequences of killing

As Ryu's sword cuts a bloody swathe through his foes, the masked men display an uncharacteristic amount of terror for a group of well-armed mercenaries, regularly crying out for mercy with "I don't want to die!" It's a noticeable if somewhat ham-fisted tonal shift for the famously blood-soaked series.

"In the past, *Ninja Gaiden* has been about just killing," says Hayashi, "Ryu was a killing machine. Yes, he does kill a lot of people [in *Ninja Gaiden 3*], but in this game you'll also face the consequences of killing all those people. Feel the consequences of all those deaths."

Q&A Yosuke Hayashi

Producer, Team Ninja



The *Ninja Gaiden* series is famous for its difficulty. Can you retain that challenge while making it accessible?

Ninja Gaiden fans want a challenge, and we want to offer them a game that is challenging. But we also don't want that to be a barrier to people who haven't played these games, who haven't played this franchise. It's not about the game being too easy or too hard, it just seems like [new players] have a different skillset. So we want to offer a game to both kinds of players. We're not trying to nerf the game. We are definitely going to have a hard game for the people who want it.

Past games have featured a lot of supernatural elements, but here we are only seeing human enemies. Will there be demons and monsters in *Ninja Gaiden 3*?

We were thinking of the concept of the Japanese dark hero. If you're just killing random monsters, it's hard to have that personal connection you need in order to create the character. You don't feel the burden of actually killing a person. So for this game we're definitely trying to make that connection, and have that feeling with the reality of cutting someone down in front of you. So we do have a lot of human enemies. That being said, we also know that one of the things about *Ninja Gaiden* that people like are the variety of battles. So we're definitely going to have a variety of enemies and a variety of things to fight.

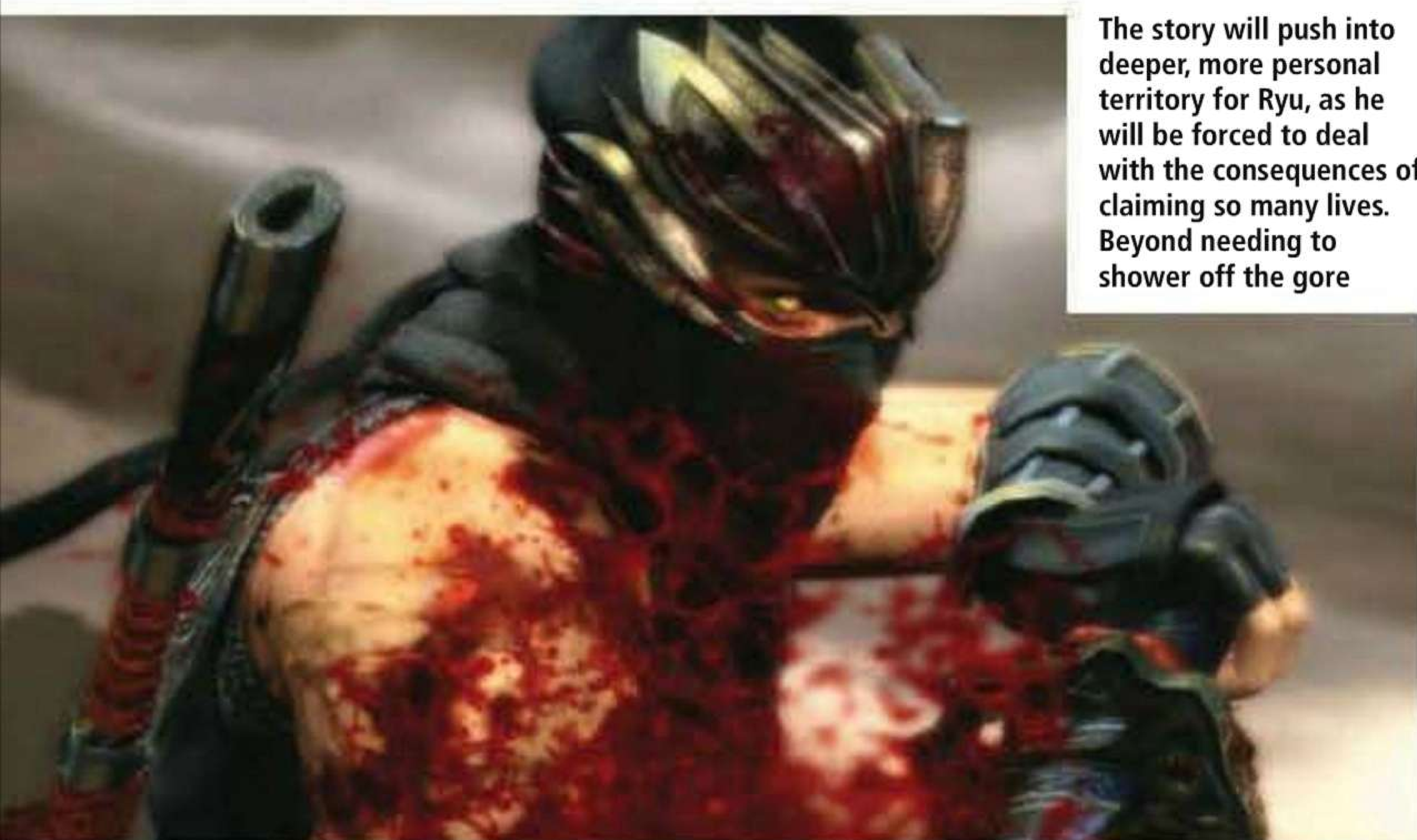
There seems to be a strong focus on swordplay. Will you keep the range of weapons from earlier games?

The story of *Ninja Gaiden* really revolves around cutting, and the sword. The concept for the combat is cutting people down with the sword, and what that really feels like. The weapons that you will use will change as the story progresses, but it's not like you go into a shop and you just open up your inventory and choose from ten weapons. We're trying to focus on the sword, and unifying gameplay and story to get one cohesive experience.

How will you expand the combat mechanics beyond those in the demo?

We know that the people out there are looking for variety, especially in moves and combos, and that depth of combat. We are working on the game right now, looking at how we can make the game deeper and more detailed for those people. So between the E3 demo and the final version that comes out we think you'll see some differences in the combat and probably something deeper than what you're playing here.

While Team Ninja assures us that there will be variety in *Ninja Gaiden 3*'s arsenal, the gameplay will primarily be using Ryu's sword. Worryingly, the sword's move-set doesn't offer much depth



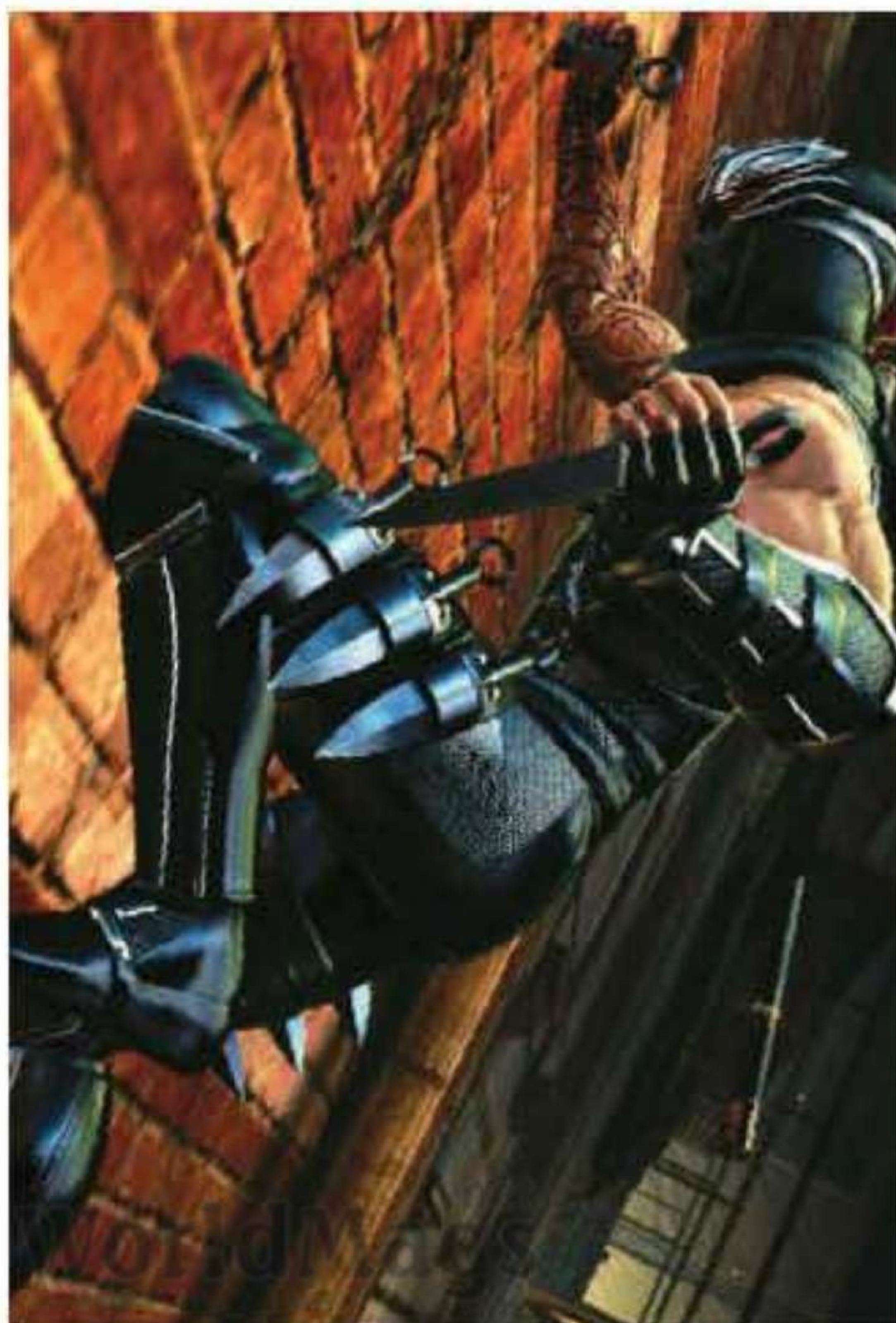
The story will push into deeper, more personal territory for Ryu, as he will be forced to deal with the consequences of claiming so many lives. Beyond needing to shower off the gore







A brief, awkward climbing sequence (left) and a rote tank boss-battle (above) were the only two times the game moved beyond QTE-addled combat with anonymous soldiers





HYPE

FAR CRY 3

Chaos and desperation on an island of madness

Format	360, PC, PS3
Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	In-house
Origin	Canada
Release	2012



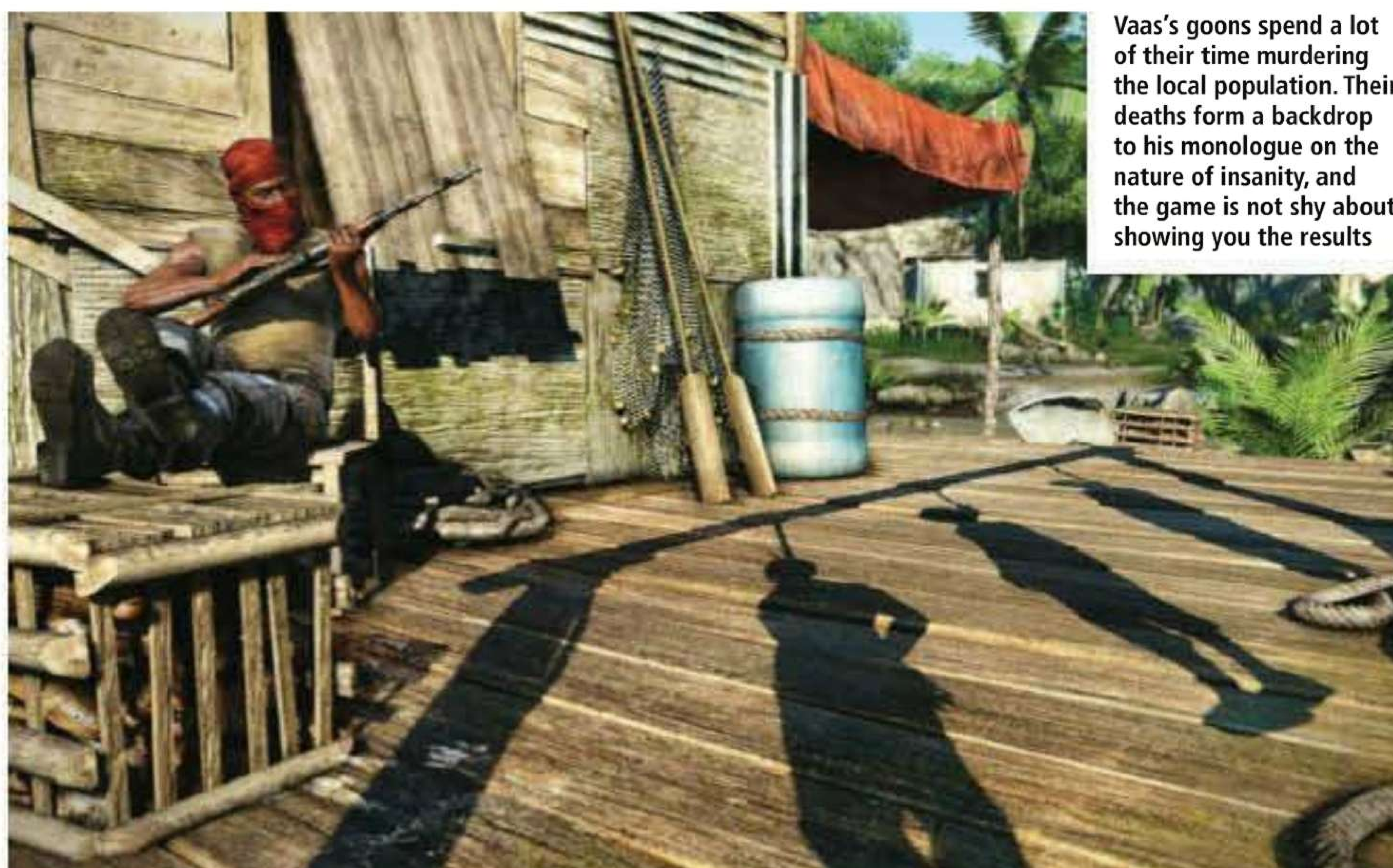
This is not the first time that Vaas, the menacingly unstable star of the demo, has tried to kill Brody. He conforms to his own (bizarrely conventional) definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting a different result



FAR CRY 3



Holding a gun to the head of the pilot, Brody ends the demo by hijacking a helicopter – only for a squatting figure in the distance to bring it down with an RPG, leading to a crash-landing in the jungle



Vaas's goons spend a lot of their time murdering the local population. Their deaths form a backdrop to his monologue on the nature of insanity, and the game is not shy about showing you the results

During the Year of Threes, at an E3 that prominently featured no less than 11 second sequels, *Far Cry 3* was the only surprise among them. Most of this year's thirdparty poster-children had been proudly paraded at publisher showcases far in advance of the show itself, leaving the three platform holders to take centre stage. But not this.

It's not surprising that it's been in hiding. *Far Cry 2* ranks among the most ambitious and conceptually far-reaching firstperson shooters of this or any generation; any sequel has a challenge on its hands, especially without Clint Hocking's reassuring spokesmanship. Based on the evidence of the E3 demo, *Far Cry 3* is a step away from the weighty ethical and geopolitical contexts of its predecessor, reining the series in to more individualistic concerns about madness and captivity. Gone are the buddies, it would appear: protagonist Jason Brody is very much alone, in a one-man struggle to escape the disorienting and deadly situation that he finds himself in. It's narrower in scope, undoubtedly, but that could make it more focused.

Its setting, too, is a big departure from *Far Cry 2*'s unaccommodating savannah, arriving back in the sort of umbrageous jungle surroundings seen in the first game in the series. "The island is absolutely a character," explains *Far Cry 3*'s irrepressible narrative director **Jason VandenBerghe**. "This is a place a long way from the long arm of the law, in disputed waters – it hasn't had a government in a long time. It's the perfect location for the *Far Cry* fantasy. In palette we're closer to *Far Cry 1*, because we're out in the tropics again – but we chose that because in the real world that is where this kind of lawlessness actually happens. We want it to feel like a believable place."

There's no shortage of dramatic firstperson moments in our reveal demonstration

The E3 demo comes from a section about a third of the way through the game, as Brody finds himself knocked out, captured and almost murdered (and not for the first time) by an unhinged gang-lord called Vaas, who subjects him to a scattered diatribe on the definition of madness before sending him hurtling off a waterfall, weighted down by a chunk of rock. Climbing back on to dry land, Brody crests a hill to discover a collection of shacks – a camp, with a military helicopter on the far side.

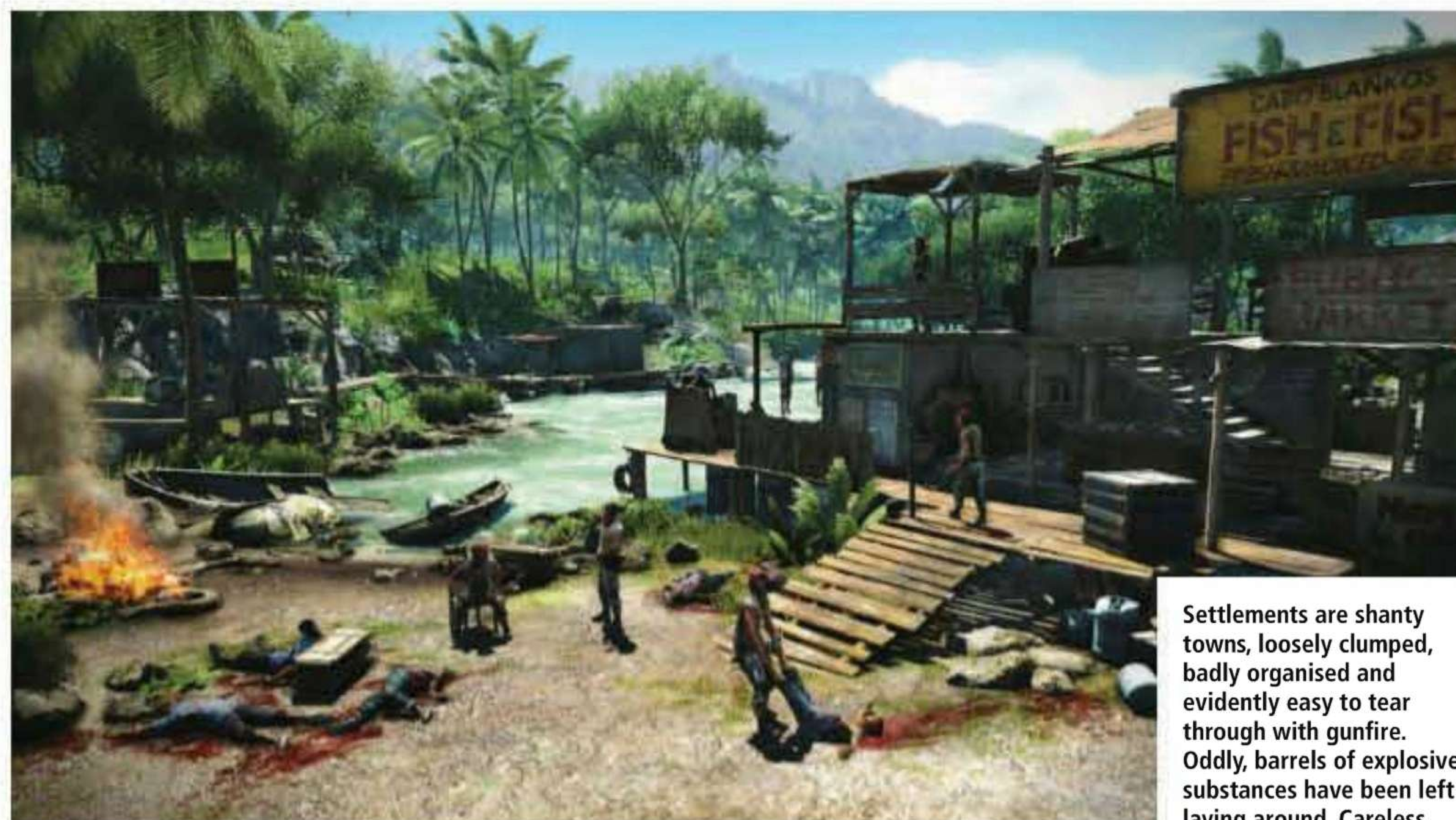
Our demonstrator stalks a patrolling enemy through the foliage before killing him with a scavenged machete and stealing his AK-47, then abandons the stealthy approach in favour of a more demonstration-friendly, explosion-heavy firefight, blowing up a bridge and ducking between shacks on the way towards the rapidly departing 'copter. Brody manages to board it, but it's not long before it's shot down in flames, and he finds himself staring at Vaas's well-worn boots as he climbs agonisingly out of the wreckage. "Did I ever tell you," he repeats from his earlier monologue, "the definition of insanity?"

There is no shortage of dramatic firstperson moments in this reveal demonstration. Watching the crazy-eyed Vaas glancing repeatedly and lingeringly at the stone tied to Brody's leg until he eventually nudges it off the cliff with his foot is desperately tense, as is Brody's furious struggle with the ropes binding his hands



Environmental narrative

'Passive storytelling' is fast becoming a game industry buzz-phrase, but it's increasingly significant as games solidify their approaches to world creation and narrative. Nowhere is it more important than in the open-world game, which needs the setting itself to tell its own tale if it is to draw players in. At the start of the *Far Cry 3* demo, Brody is staring at a rusting, crashed plane, for which no explanation is offered – such organic points of interest are what drive exploration in an open world, and *Far Cry 3* would do well to scatter them generously around if it's to maintain the series' credibility as the most open-ended FPS series.



Settlements are shanty towns, loosely clumped, badly organised and evidently easy to tear through with gunfire. Oddly, barrels of explosive substances have been left laying around. Careless



as he sinks further and further into the blue lagoon below, surrounded by weighed-down corpses suspended eerily in the deep.

But as for *Far Cry 2*'s most involving and engaging firstperson moments – the malaria jabs; the weapon cleaning; the truly wince-inducing improvised first-aid, such as digging bullets out of your wounded limbs – it seems that these may not be carried over into the series' latest offering.

"We were inspired by *Far Cry 2*, of course. You can expect stuff that fits our new narrative and our new context, our new setting," says VandenBerghe. "What I loved about those *Far Cry 2* mechanics is that they fitted the narrative perfectly. We want to do the same thing – but not necessarily with the same mechanics.

"We're not doing simple good versus evil choices. I don't think it's interesting. I want to present the player with intense situations, and then I don't even want to watch what you do. That's not the designer's business."

Far Cry 3's reveal demonstration was very scripted for what is claimed to be an open-world game – but then, most game demos are. We'll need to try diving into *Far Cry 3*'s jungle for ourselves in order to find out how true the game is to the series' previous, open-ended ethos – but VandenBerghe has some reassuring words.

"If you look at the vistas and the scale of *Far Cry 1* and *2*, take that and multiply it by ten," he says. "We want to take that even further. We're focusing on taking that scale and making it dense, so that around every corner there's something to find or to see. That's a key in open-world experiences. We ask ourselves: if there wasn't anyone to shoot in this game, could it still be fun?"

Q&A

Jason VandenBerghe
Narrative director, *Far Cry 3*



How would you say *Far Cry 3* relates to *Far Cry 2* conceptually?
We don't have the same message, but we are inspired by that team's achievement, we want to further that cause. The economy, the politics, the factions, all of that very high-level stuff, we wanted to bring it down to an individual and personal level, talking about individual madness and experience. *Far Cry 2* is about crazy governments; *Far Cry 3* is about crazy people.

If you're working on that intimate character level, how important is the digital acting?
Digital acting is core, absolutely core. I think we're pushing the envelope both in terms of our technology and our process – I don't know another group that's doing what we're doing. We're doing full body and facial capture so we get the whole performance all at once, so it eliminates that weird disconnect you get from doing it at different times. It's a subtle difference, but at this level of fidelity it turns out to be a really big deal.

The other thing we're doing, the most important thing, is actor-centric character creation. Most developers go, "Here's the archetype I want, here's how it's being used, here are the scenes we want – now let's get an actor." Then the actor shows up and follows orders. It works, but that's not how you get great performances. If you brought Dustin Hoffman on to your set and directed him that way, he would tell you go go fuck yourself. Jodie Foster would not put up with that shit. So the way you do it is by finding great actors and empowering them to create the character.

Vaas is a discovery that we made while casting for another character, for instance. He wasn't right to play the big, tough guy that we were casting for, but the more we looked at him, the more we felt he really had potential, so we changed the character for him to a more disturbing, scarier guy.

What is the *Far Cry* franchise about, in your opinion, if it has a unifying tenet?
Fundamentally, *Far Cry* has always been about someone who is doing one thing and then gets fucked, and ends up having to be a hero. That's what it should be about. That's a great fantasy: what if I wasn't surrounded by witnesses? Would I be a hero? We're not doing simple good-versus-evil choices. I don't think it's interesting. I want to present the player with intense situations, and then I don't even want to watch what you do. That's not the designer's business.

Drake's Deception promises a more diverse set of locations than the globe-trotting *Uncharted 2*, with parched deserts, London pubs and the obligatory lost city confirmed


HYPE

UNCHARTED 3:

DRAKE'S DECEPTION

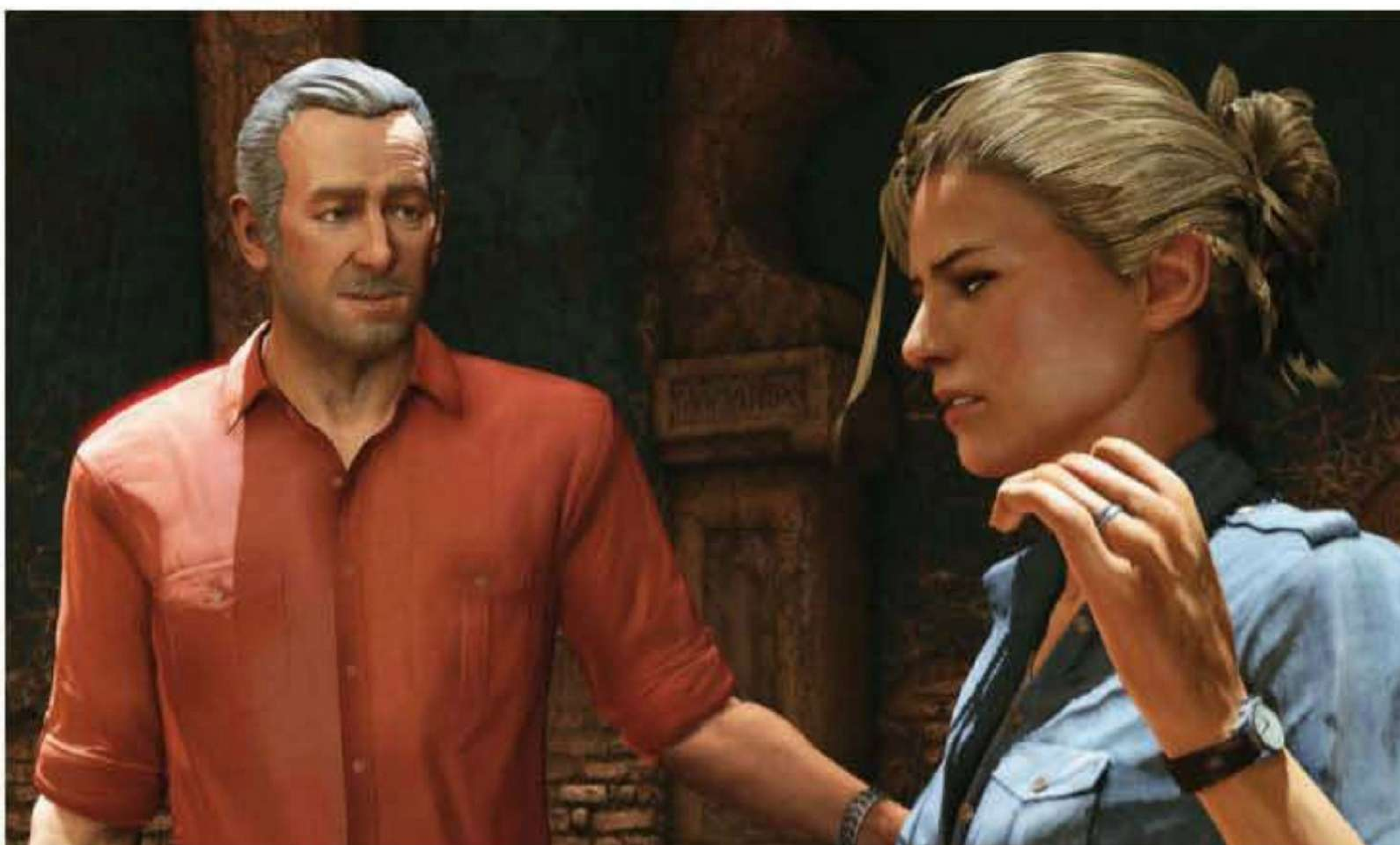
Search for a lost Arabian city in Drake's third instalment

Format PS3
Publisher SCE
Developer Naughty Dog
Origin US
Release November





UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION



The gang's all here: while the setting of *Uncharted* shifts largely to the Arabian Peninsula, don't expect too many surprises in terms of Drake's companions, although they do manage to look even better than they did in *Uncharted 2*

No series demonstrates the odd dichotomy between play and cutscene like *Uncharted* does. In non-interactive moments, Nathan Drake is likeable, charming even; an identifiable everyman. But when you control him, he's a genocidal superman, mowing down hundreds of enemies without batting an eyelid. It's a common problem for character-led, narrative-based games – and something that caused even the otherwise exquisitely paced *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* to occasionally misstep, when it asked the player to kill wave after wave of enemies before allowing them to progress.

Those hoping that *Drake's Deception* might see the series' hero engaging with enemies in more inventive ways than shooting them or brawling may have to wait longer. However, the E3 demo – short and choreographed as it was – suggested that Naughty Dog's grasp of pacing is as firm as ever. Presented context-free on a derelict cruise ship – although the game's plot concerns the search for lost Arabian city the Iram of the Pillars – the demo saw Drake murder his way into the hull by sneaking up on enemies and breaking their necks (we weren't able to see what would happen if you fluffed this movement, but we expect a lengthy gunfight). The action we've come to expect from *Uncharted* didn't occur until a firefight in the cargo hold, and even that was relatively short-lived: a stray explosion causes a hull breach, leading to the ship listing, water flowing into the hold and the ship ending up on its side.

Your escape from the ship sees Drake swimming and wading through its many flooded corridors, with the rushing water frequently causing unexpected environmental hazards – sometimes flooding a previously clear corridor, and at one point even trapping Drake under falling debris. While there's the sense that the player is, in this instance, being rapidly whisked from one near-death experience to the next in order to provide a cinematic experience, it's still thrilling, albeit over far too soon.

The player is being rapidly whisked from one near-death experience to the next

Multiplayer is just as action-packed, and naturally less scripted too. A surprising hit feature of *Uncharted 2*, it was given as much prominence at E3 as the singleplayer mode, and has undergone some subtle yet important tweaks: movement and aiming have been carefully fiddled with, and acres of unlockables are to be found.

Characters can be heavily customised in terms of their dress, weapon loadout and boosters (*Uncharted*'s take on perks). We also saw more of the new 'buddy' system, which rewards players for keeping close and cooperating with another specific player. And it encourages them to engage in some post-murder levity worthy of Drake himself – there are extra rewards for high-fiving your partner after a kill, for instance.

Pitching a team of Heroes against Villains, there's clearly been an effort to capture some of the cinematic, set-piece-based feel of the singleplayer game. Maps can now be far more dynamic than those seen in *Uncharted 2* – while the Chateau area we spent much of our time on is very much in the style of the second game's multiplayer arenas, the Air Strip map puts the Heroes in a cargo plane attempting to take off. The Villains, in a pursuing convoy of vehicles, must leap from truck to truck in an attempt to gain access to it, before the action moves to an airport for the conclusion of the showdown.

While this kind of dynamic, evolving action isn't unique to this team-based multiplayer – the original *Unreal Tournament* in 1999 used moving trains and the like in its Assault mode – this is the most developed take on it we've seen, and, depending how extensively it's used, may serve as a key differentiator from online competitors.

The co-op mode, meanwhile, which Naughty Dog is billing as a distinct adventure of its own, builds on *Uncharted 2* foundations. The self-contained co-op mission structure from *Among Thieves* has been replaced by a campaign complete with a unique setting, story and cutscenes of its own. It took *Among Thieves* to deliver on the potential apparent in the first game's campaign, and it seems that *Drake's Deception* – as well as providing a similarly breathless singleplayer journey – will be building just as confidently on the second title's forays online.



Playing with power

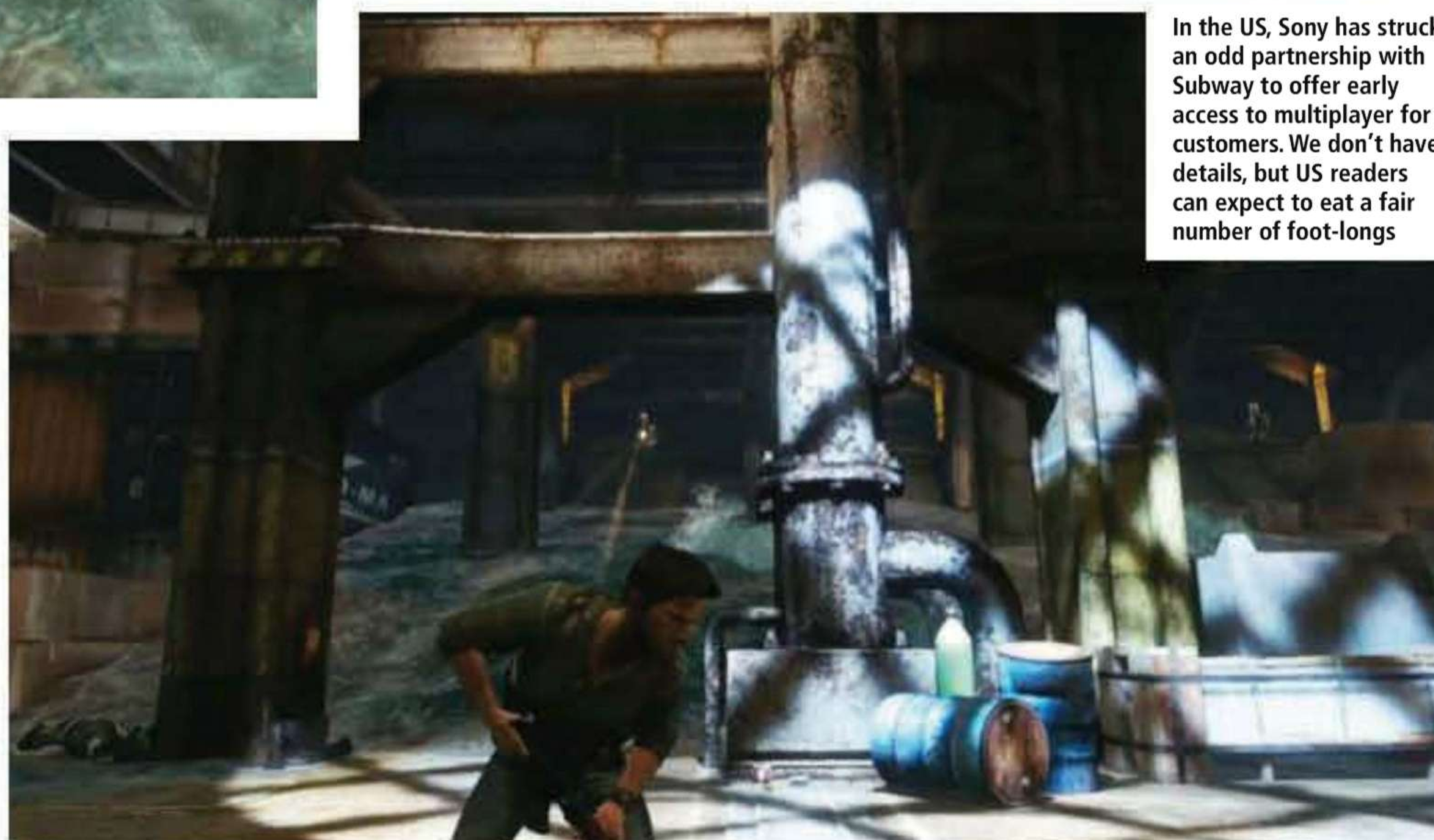
While buddies high-fiving each other in multiplayer are a bit too self congratulatory and *Army Of Two*-like, some other new features for multiplayer balance this out. Power Plays, for example, are moments when the losing team will be given a boost (such as the ability to more easily spot enemies) to try to balance out the playing field, with the winning team granted some major rewards if it manages to hold fast. And if high-fiving enemies still annoy you, they're completely vulnerable to attack during the animation, making it a high-risk decision on their (or your) part.

Water flows in an entirely realistic manner during the ship-based battle, giving us hope that Drake will combat his environment in more realistic ways than simply hanging on brick ledges



Drake comes close to death at the end of the demo, but he doesn't seem in as much danger here as he does during a jaunt to London, as he comes up against the Helen Mirren-esque Katherine Marlowe





In the US, Sony has struck an odd partnership with Subway to offer early access to multiplayer for customers. We don't have details, but US readers can expect to eat a fair number of foot-longs



HYPE

DEAD ISLAND

Will drop-in, drop-out multiplayer mean no man can be an island?

Format	360, PC, PS3
Publisher	Deep Silver
Developer	Techland
Origin	Poland
Release	September

For those of us who lived through the almost completely zombie-free '90s, it's hard to believe that we've entered the second straight decade of undead popularity. Dawn Of The Dead was more prophetic than any of us realised, specifically in the culture of consumerism that Romero parodied, and the zombie as a satirical reflection of ourselves has only become more appropriate. Unfortunately for *Dead Island*, consumers have yet to acquire the undiscerning tastes of true zombies, and though many have had their interest in the game piqued by the game's astonishing announcement trailer (a time-reversed tragedy in three minutes about a father failing to save his daughter's life), in its current state the game must go some way before it can claim to have captured that animation's startling impact.

With parodic social commentary exhausted by the *Dead Rising* series, indie projects such as *Dead State* and *Project Zomboid* have attempted to craft survival RPGs that capture the true sense of despair and hopelessness that lingers at the heart of zombie fiction. *Dead Island* pays surface attention to the latter, by way of game mechanics that – destroyed tropicality aside – reskin *Left 4 Dead* as a loot-driven action RPG. As the player progresses through the

An example of humour in the backstory is the game's tank character Sam B (below) who's on the island to sing his one-hit wonder, Who Do You Voodoo?



Projectile weapons are effective but scarce in the early stages of the game, but it remains to be seen if Techland stays true to that as the game progresses

As in most zombie games, you are essentially immune to infection. The zombies getting close is more an annoying loss of control than a disaster





DEAD ISLAND



The game's melee combat gets throwing weapons right. Slicing a zombie's head off with a machete might feel clumsy, but throwing it directly into the forehead of the next to charge at you feels gloriously cinematic



Though most of the game is experienced from firstperson, there are occasional cinematic sequences, and they concern themselves with exposition rather than moments of high drama

world, they find themselves at safehouses that act as hubs, with otherwise static NPCs waiting to offer you jobs (collecting batteries, for example) in return for experience or other rewards. While the tropical setting makes for a striking backdrop to the game's horror, our sojourn out into the area surrounding a church safehouse with three other players (*Dead Island* will support drop-in and out co-op multiplayer in the campaign) found it less satisfying as a piece of open-world design. *Left 4 Dead*'s levels were carefully constructed to reward a team of four playing together well, but *Dead Island*'s setting seems intended for the single player, a feeling borne out by the undead populating it. Only the occasional special zombies, such as the huge, straitjacketed Ram which charges the players – yet another photocopy from Valve's title – require teamwork, and in many cases our squad found it was just easier to ignore them or run away.

The tropical setting makes for a striking backdrop to the game's horror

For a game that concentrates on melee combat, the mechanics of hand-to-hand fighting feel crude. Zombies are fully deformable, with their bodies reflecting the damage you inflict (up to and including the loss of limbs) but the melee takes its cues from *Left 4 Dead 2*'s 'swing and hope for the best' approach rather than anything as considered as *Zeno Clash*'s nuanced take on firstperson fighting. Running out of stamina – which happens often, and leaves you momentarily winded – feels more like an annoyance than a nod to realism, but the game's skill tree, unlocked via experience, is full of ways to mitigate this via stamina increases or buffs.

The shooting mechanics, meanwhile, feel more than a little weedy (firing an automatic weapon at the Ram gave us absolutely no feedback, and left us uncertain if we were having an effect at all) and it seems clear that loot – in the form of new weapons – is *Dead Island*'s major incentive to keep playing. Aping *Dead Rising 2*, *Dead Island* will allow players to combine their items in order to make more powerful weapons – changing, for example, a basic kitchen knife into an explosive device, or electrically charging the blade of a machete. One final twist to combat is that each of the four main characters has a 'rage ability': our character's skill made attacks with edged weapons temporarily more effective, allowing us to eviscerate zombies in one slice.

It may not be capable of hitting the emotional heights of its trailer, and its inspirations from *Left 4 Dead* and *Dead Rising* are obvious, but *Dead Island*'s setting and the open-world structure still hold some promise. On the basis of our playthrough, however, Techland's title is in danger of equalling less than the sum of its dismembered limbs.



Wish you weren't here

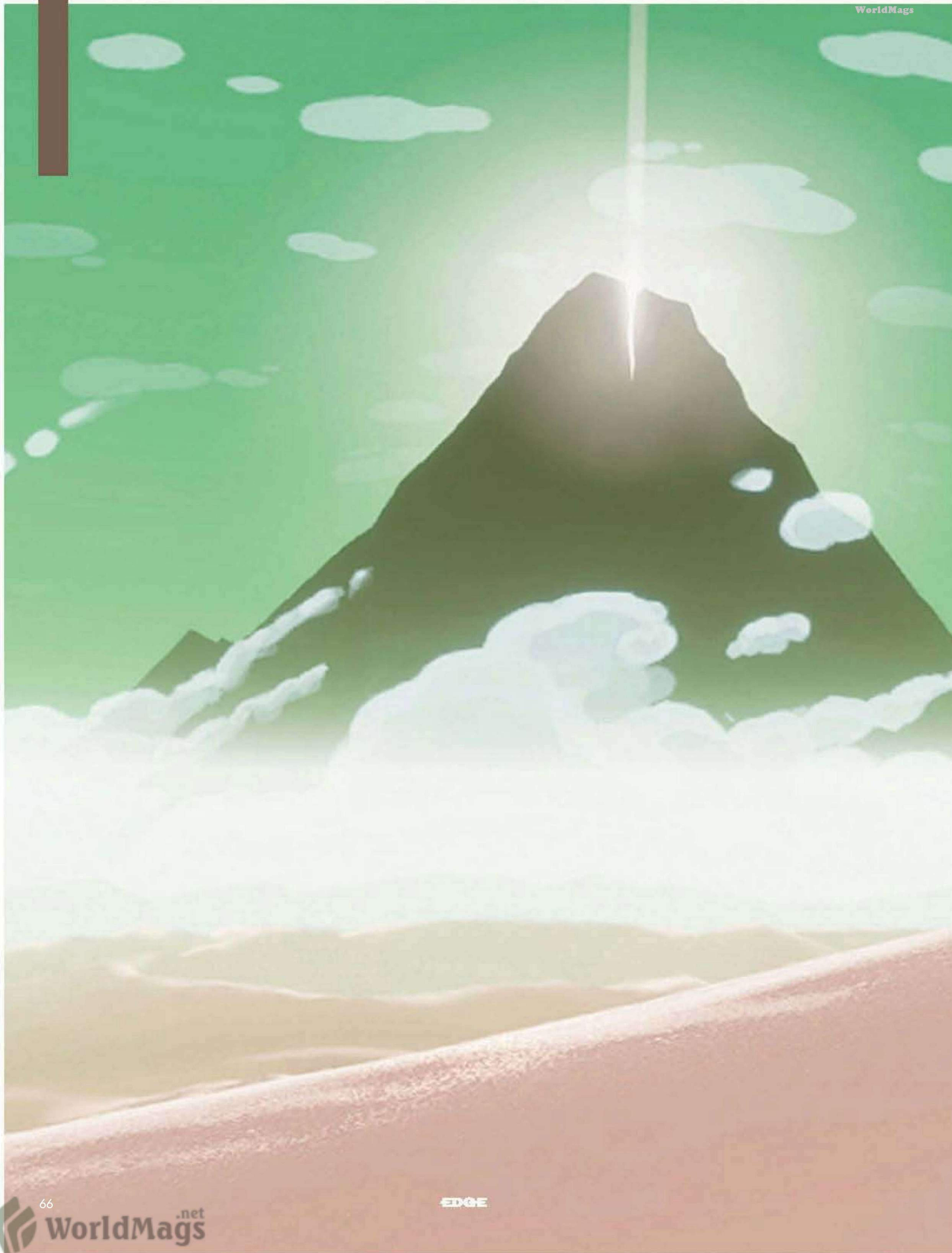
Set on the fictional island of Banoi near Papa New Guinea, *Dead Island* takes its aping of *Left 4 Dead* surprisingly far – at least in the build we've seen – by locking the player down to one of four distinct personalities: hotel employee Xian Mei, rapper Sam B, surfer Logan and Purna, a bodyguard. Each character is also specifically classed (as leader, jack-of-all-trades, assassin and tank) in a nod to the online multiplayer and reflected in their skill trees. Whether these characters will be engaging enough to spark arguments worthy of our "Who gets to be Coach?" *Left 4 Dead 2* lobby moments remains unclear.


3D
Compatible Game


PlayStation Network


PS3
MOTORSTORM
APOCALYPSE
16





HYPE

JOURNEY

Don't stop believing as you wander through this online desert

Format	PS3
Publisher	Sony
Developer	Thatgamecompany
Origin	US
Release	2011

It's unclear whether players will ever actually reach the mountain that seems to be their destination, or if it just serves the purpose of aligning you in a largely landmark-free environment



Flower's narrative was expressed through your effect on the world, so it's not completely impossible that we'll see *Journey*'s desert begin to change as players travel through it



The first films were silent; it would take 30 years and countless evolutions – moving from fixed-camera shots of trains to narratives with continuity, editing and symbolism – before sound could even begin to play a role. This addition caused huge creative problems; the difficulty of adding dialogue caused a return to static shots, while actors struggled with the new aspects of their work. What happened, however, was not that filmmakers steamed ahead with the techniques they had learned in the silent era, but that they realigned their creative efforts for the new standards.

When it became apparent that much of the gaming's future was online, no such growing pains were seen. Developers didn't have to return to the simplicity they once had in an attempt to conquer this new challenge: multiplayer modes once played in splitscreen we're now played online, and player interaction – which was previously friends sharing a sofa – turned into friends chatting from different sofas, in their own homes.

Journey is an attempt to intensify the power of online interactions by limiting them – and simplifying near-everything else about the game. Dropping players in an almost featureless desert, and granting them control over playable characters that require a power-up to do something as basic as jump, *Journey* offers players almost no ability to communicate – other than via an inscrutable shout.

The shout, though communicating nothing specific, offers the principal way to work with the other player: each shout powers up your companion (and so far, there can be only one such ally at a time) for a single jump. There's no way of learning who your fellow traveller is, though players do have abstract symbols on the front of their cloaks that will aid you in working out if you've played with any given individual before. Playing a prerelease version at E3, the companion we found deep in the desert was as likely to have been another player somewhere on the show floor as it was a member of staff back at Thatgamecompany's offices.

You may never meet the player you share these moments with again

That mystery is intriguing, but equally unclear is your place in this world. Both you and your companion are incapable of playing anything but the role that has been crafted for you: that of a traveller. In demonstrations so far, the ultimate aim of the game has been made no more clear than that the player is moving towards a mountain in the distance, which, omnipresent, brings to mind *Half-Life 2*'s citadel. Wander too far in the wrong direction and winds will blow you back towards the distant peak. Thatgamecompany promises that clues to the nature of *Journey*'s setting and story will be found as the player progresses, but the early moments of the game will frustrate those looking for quick answers or an obvious narrative hook.

It's clear that *Journey* is intended to be played co-operatively. With interaction limited to movement, the ability to give each other grief is near non-existent, and when you're alone, trudging through the desert can feel rather one-note. Even the game's flourishes – such as the player's ability to surf down sandy inclines – can only offer so much variety. Yet when shared with a stranger, these moments become an improvised dance with another person in the world, bringing you closer than any voice chat or context-sensitive high-five ever could. That you may never meet the player you share these moments with again makes them all the sweeter. The intention, it seems, is to highlight how fragile the connections between ourselves and other people are.

While we've yet to hear anything to match *Flower*'s entrancing audio, *Journey* is visually stunning, the studio's familiar palette of pastel colours and fluid animation ensuring that this is a desert that looks beautiful, rather than barren.

Players expecting the sand to signal a sandbox, however, will be surprised: Thatgamecompany is less intent than Peter Molyneux to promise the player anything other than a trip from A to B on their journey, and the desert isn't as big as it looks. The question that remains is whether *Journey* can sustain interest and transcend its restricted functionality and bare-bones approach to player interactions. ■



Just deserts

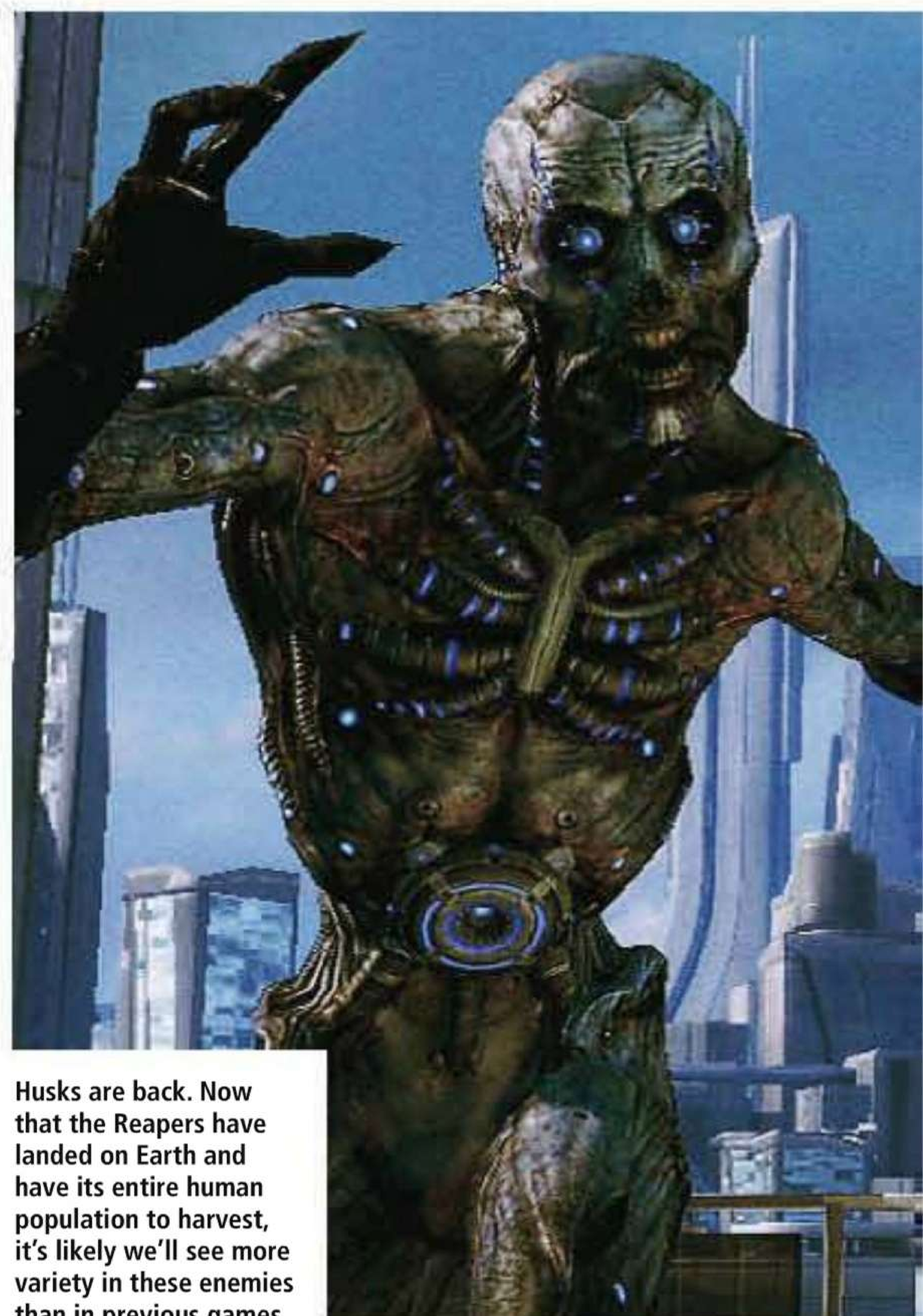
The desert of *Journey* isn't completely featureless: jumps are gained through finding floating swirls of patterned cloth, and these are usually positioned near to the ruins that dot the landscape, placed to enable even solo players to climb as high as they need to (which can often require a spot of effort to puzzle out the next place to jump to).

There are other ways to navigate, too. At one point, our traveller was swept up by dancing kites, but our E3 demo ended with the appearance of a huge and ominous citadel that almost certainly needs to be traversed.


Cerberus troopers will sometimes pilot mech suits like this one, and Shepard can commandeer them to clear blocked paths and fight enemies

Importing your *ME2* save will allow you to carry over your decisions from the first two games, and if you had a relationship with Garrus you can finally find out if he's the type to call you the next day




Husks are back. Now that the Reapers have landed on Earth and have its entire human population to harvest, it's likely we'll see more variety in these enemies than in previous games



H Y P E

MASS EFFECT 3

There's a new invader in BioWare's space opera trilogy: Kinect

Format	360, PC, PS3
Publisher	EA
Developer	BioWare
Origin	Canada
Release	2012



bit.ly/mN0yjd
Screenshot gallery

The Omni-tool, *Mass Effect*'s glowing catch-all tech interface, can now transform into the Omni-blade, augmenting Shepard's melee attack and making it more than just an elbow to the face

Not playable on E3's show floor, everything we learned about *Mass Effect 3* came from press conferences and behind-closed-door demos.

Game mechanics (and your squad) are a blend of the first two games: grenades are back (and now arc), Liara and Garrus make up the squad during a mission in which Mordin Solus plays a key role, and Tali is present in a cutscene montage. Weapon customisation and skill trees, simplified for the second game, are again more robust and, hopefully, less burdened by bad UI.

You can once again customise Shepard's weapons as well as gender, appearance and party. Recalling the *Dead Space* series, Shepard can find workbenches that allow him to add, remove, and swap modifications on his and his allies' weapons. Visual differences between mods aim to aid you in keeping track of customisations – it's shaping up to be an improvement over the clunky menu-based upgrading of the first game.

New skills have been added, and each skill can be upgraded in a variety of ways – making each one full tree rather than a one-off ability. In the demo, the combat mastery skill could, among other things, give a boost to damage in combat or to influence in conversation.

But at its core, this is still a cover-based shooter. Early in the game, Shepard is on trial for a decision made in the final *Mass Effect 2* DLC pack, Arrival. When Reapers attack the planet, Shepard escapes across the rubble and rooftops with the help of David Anderson (who you may or may not have recommended to the Galactic Council in the first game), with air-con units on the rooftops taking the place of the crates, counters and waist-high walls that littered *Mass Effect 2*'s cover-based combat environments. At the end of this sequence, Anderson reinstates Shepard's command and sends him off to recruit a fleet to fight the Reapers.

One mission has Shepard helping Mordin free a Krogan female from a facility defended by Cerberus troops, indoctrinated and under the control of the Reapers. Her rescue by Salarians is key to an alliance between them and the Krogans, something Shepard appears to be keen to encourage. Given the series' tendency toward quid-pro-quo quests (think of the loyalty missions in *Mass Effect 2*, where helping a crew member with their personal issues resulted in them becoming personally loyal to Shepard), it won't be surprising if Shepard and company must assist multiple species on this scale in return for their support in the endgame.

While many loved characters are returning in these demos, we can't help but wonder how integrated their presence will be. *Mass Effect 2* could easily end with the death of most of Shepard's crew – will returning teammates be fully fleshed-out allies in the third game? Or will they be relegated to incidental cameos, emails, and brief conversations such as in *Mass Effect 2*, adding a superficial touches to each individual's play without changing the overall experience?

That's the big question *Mass Effect 3* has to answer: will decisions and outcomes from previous games be seasonings or ingredients? The end of Arrival, which saw Shepard choose, without your input, to sacrifice a colony of Batarians in order to delay the Reapers' assault on Earth, already suggests that BioWare has had to sacrifice some freedom in order to set up its finale. And after two games of hand-wringing dilemmas and far-reaching decisions, this is a finale that many require not just to reward, but reflect their investment in *Mass Effect*'s universe. ■



Kinectic energy

During the Microsoft press conference, BioWare demoed optional Kinect voice recognition in conversation and combat.

You can choose dialogue options by reading them aloud. It feels odd: conversations have you speaking an abbreviated version of Shepard's dialogue, whose lines are more detailed and likely better-acted, like you're a voice in his head.

In battle, we see Kinect-controlled positioning ("Garrus, move up!") and attack commands ("Liara, use singularity!"). Setting up attacks with two quick shouts rather than trips to the menu has the potential to alter the rhythm of combat.

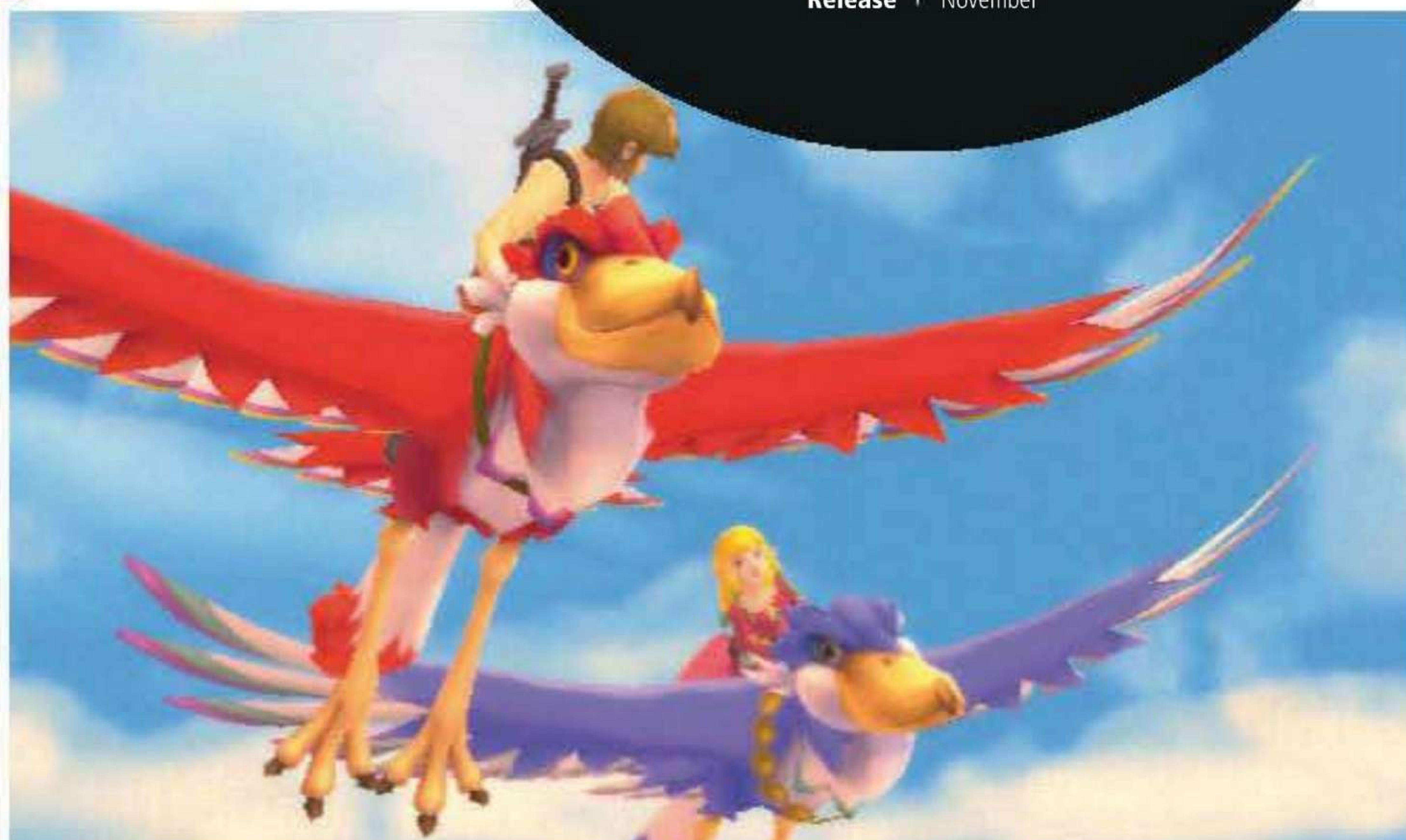
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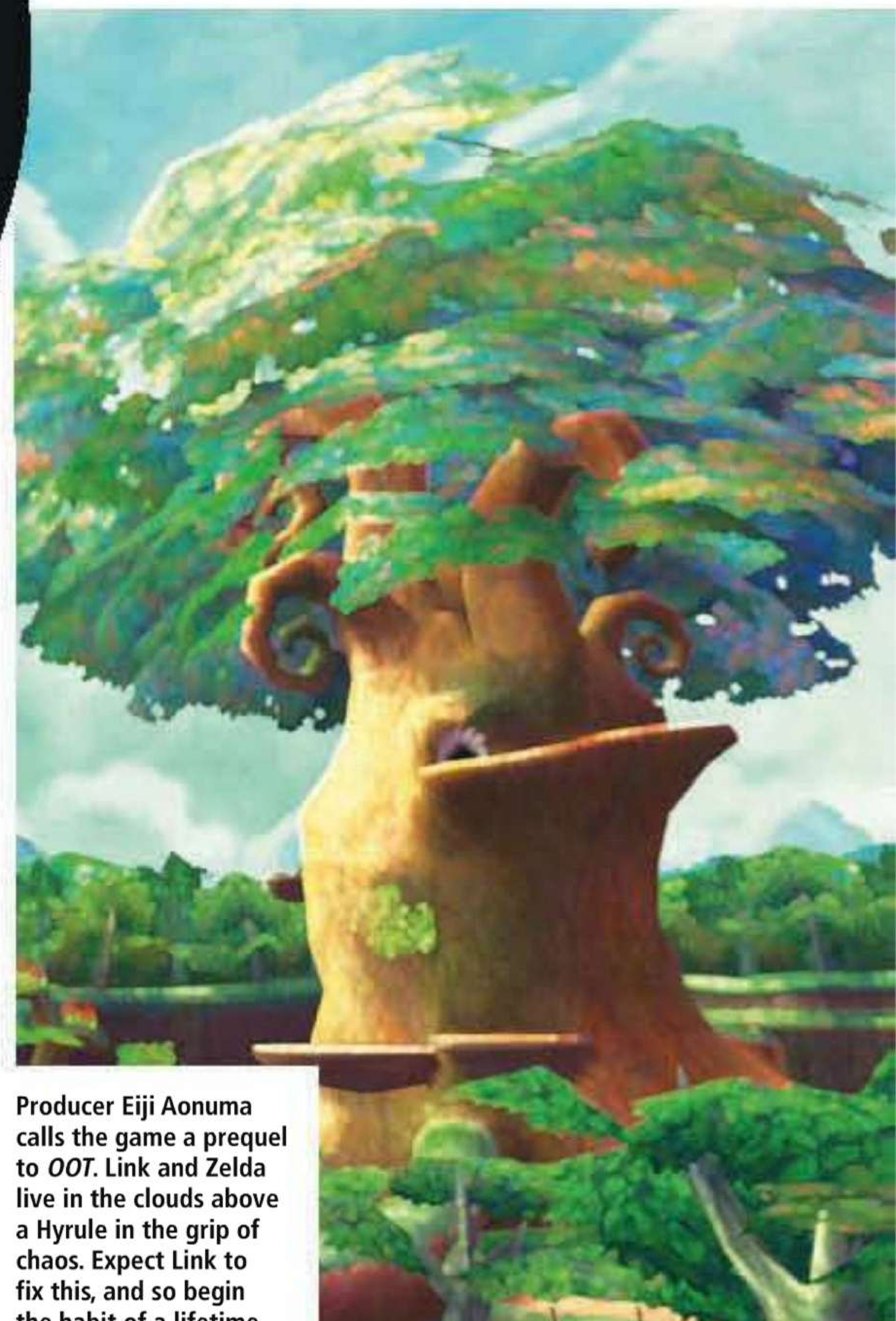
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: SKYWARD SWORD

Link channels Errol Flynn, and his swordplay is poetry in MotionPlus

Format	Wii
Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	In-house
Origin	Japan
Release	November







Producer Eiji Aonuma calls the game a prequel to *OOT*. Link and Zelda live in the clouds above a Hyrule in the grip of chaos. Expect Link to fix this, and so begin the habit of a lifetime



Link's added speed comes at a cost. A stamina meter ticks down during any strenuous activity (running, climbing, hanging). Depleting it leaves the poor chap doubled over in agony. Or worse, falling to his death

The entire interface is a Remote-pointer-free zone. MotionPlus lets players swing the Remote towards menu options and rotate the wrist to cycle through inventories and potions

As Miyamoto and assorted *Zelda* alumni used Nintendo's E3 conference to look back at 25 years of the series, *Skyward Sword* was the forward-thinking part of the show. As well as showcasing some responsive one-to-one MotionPlus sword control, the demo hints at a more freeform *Zelda* than those past. The trial dungeon is an open space, hiding items and keys behind labyrinthine geography instead of challenge rooms. Link's flying beetle – steered like a *Sports Resort* plane – draws action up into the rafters and a series of treasure-laden vents.

Fresh athleticism ensures Link is far from grounded himself. A dash move lends parkour overtones: bounding gaps auto-jump couldn't manage and scampering up to low-hanging ledges. Both play a key part in the Siren World, *Skyward Sword*'s take on *A Link To The Past*'s Dark World. Entered by embedding his sword into magical markers, our now bladeless hero relies on athletic route-finding to outrun shadowy guardians who prowl the land. Echoes of *Phantom Hourglass*'s central dungeon are unsurprising, for *Skyward Sword* sees *Hourglass* director Hidemaro Fujibayashi making his home console debut.

Back in Hyrule, however, Link's blade rarely leaves your hand. Puzzle designs rely on its added accuracy, such as when Link upsets three eyeballs functioning as door locks by waving his sword in dizzying circles. Solutions are playfully responsive in a way they couldn't be with canned animation. Snipping individual strands of a spider's web and watching it sag and unravel is a destructive time-sink that rivals bullying chickens in Kakariko Village. The sword, so often playing second fiddle to Link's exotic kitbag, is now the true star of the show.

And it takes centre stage in combat. The focus here is timing and precision; spotting an open angle of attack and delivering a stinging directional blow. Goblins block with a single weapon, inviting a stab on the opposite side. Dual-wielding skeleton knights up the stakes, asking you to pilot a swing in the gap between blades. Flailing results in block after block and a tired arm. More exotic beasts hide their weakness. Spiders are flipped with upward cuts and thrust in the belly. And all three hydra heads need lopping off at once.

Building combat around efficient directional cuts creates a series of beautifully tactile deathblows. Cleaving those hydra necks in a single cut leaves your arm outstretched as the decapitated body squirms onscreen – the very image of a hero. Nintendo strikes a canny balance of freedom and hand-holding; Link's Z-targeting locks the player positionally into combat over which they have a great deal of control. The only victim in all this – besides the legions of evil, and your arm – is Link's trusty shield. Shaking the Nunchuk to raise it feels crude, and often goes forgotten.

The real test of Link's motion mettle comes in a straight one-on-one swordfight against *Skyward Sword*'s Ganondorf stand-in Lord Ghirahim, a gangly man with a grotesque lizard tongue and a surprisingly talky intro (for a *Zelda* game). There is no glowing weakspot or item-specific exploit, just two blades going at each other. Diagonal projectile formations can be batted back with a correctly positioned swipe, but otherwise victory relies on nimble dodges and those satisfying swings.

Sandwiched between a year of retro celebrations and a promise of Wii U delights to come, it would have been easy for *Skyward Sword* to drown in the din of a *Zelda*-heavy E3. But thanks to masterful motion control and a fresh take on *Zelda*'s well-worn tropes, this Link came out swinging. ■



Reach for the sky

A final segment set in Link's village in the clouds ends the demo on a traditional note. It feels like a pre-quest minigame or tutorial as Link gets to grips with his aerial Epona replacement, a vibrant bird. In the final game we'll be able to dive through the clouds to reach Hyrule. For now, we enjoy responsive controls, tilting the Remote down to divebomb before rhythmically wafting to regain height. It allows us to take in the gorgeous Cezanne-inspired clouds, too. Wii U's *Zelda* HD tech demo draws louder oohs, but *Skyward Sword* holds its SD ground with an effect that renders the distant horizon in daubs of pastel hues.

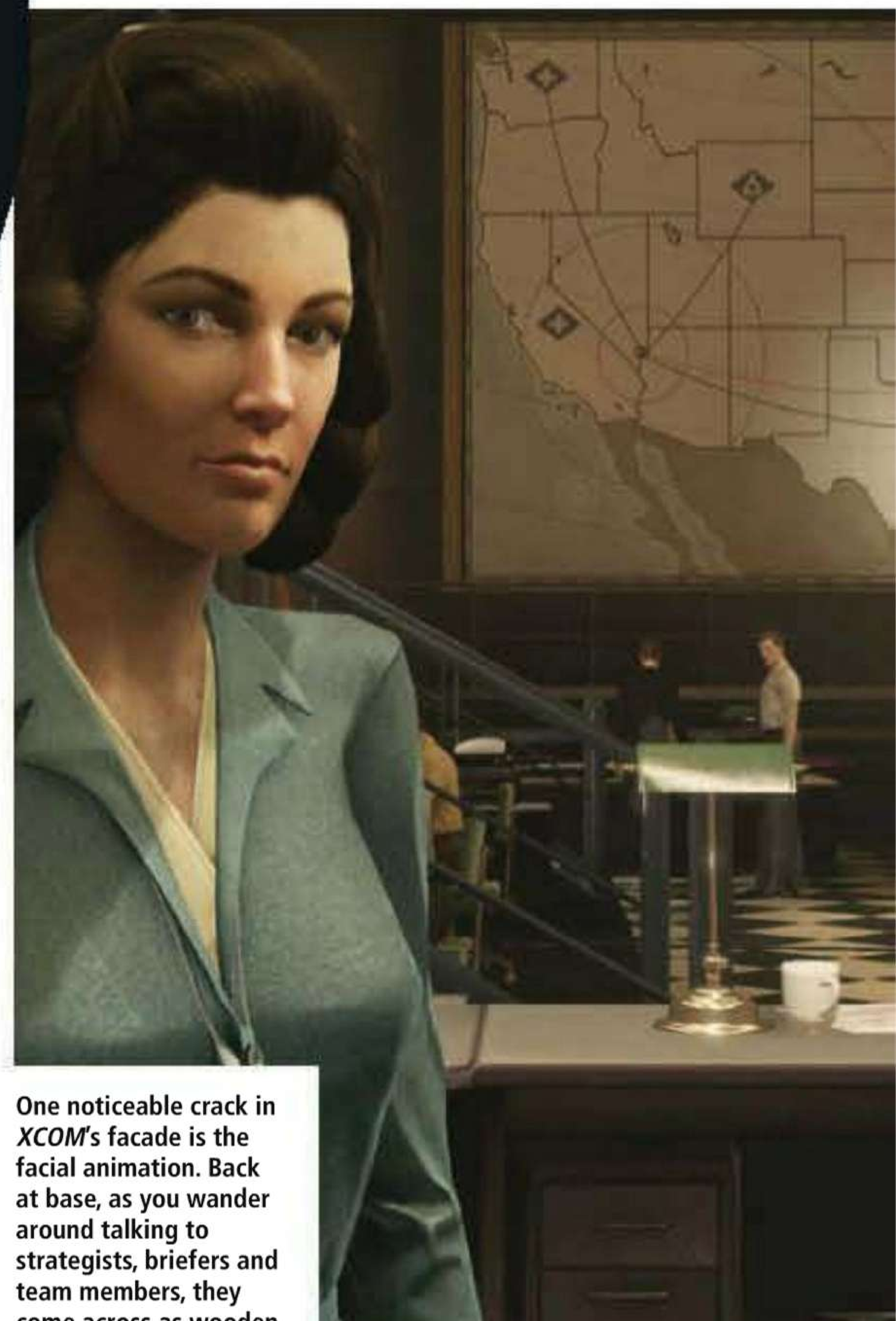
HYPE

XCOM

The veil is lifted on a revered series' much-anticipated comeback

Format	360, PC, PS3
Publisher	Take 2
Developer	2K Marin
Origin	US/Australia
Release	March 2012





One noticeable crack in *XCOM*'s facade is the facial animation. Back at base, as you wander around talking to strategists, briefers and team members, they come across as wooden

Abilities and technology stolen from aliens can be deployed or squirrelled away for research, but an energy shield or plasma turret is often more useful in the field than at home



XCOM's retro-futuristic reverse-engineered alien tech has something of a Ghostbusters feel, oddly. The suburban America that it depicts is brightly-coloured, idyllic, redolent of idealised '50s and '60s American illustration

America in 1962: colourful, increasingly prosperous, secure, not yet reeling from the Kennedy assassination and the impact of the Vietnam War. *XCOM* begins with silent, home-shot footage of the subversion of that ideal: the archetypal hometown invaded by an aggressive alien influence, viciously geometrical extraterrestrial nanotechnology that terraforms the suburban landscape into sheer onyx columns, eating through flesh and earth with equal vigour. With its startling aesthetic contrast between a comic-book-style, aspirational '60s America and crystalline, alien geometry, it makes a hell of a visual statement. Considering the number of alien invasions we've seen, that in itself is an achievement.

The game has been shrouded in silence for a good year, and it would appear that a substantial change in direction has manifested in that time. What 2K Marin found itself developing was a successor to *BioShock 2*, a run-and-gun shooter that, despite its inventive weapons and enemy types, was not the interpretation of *XCOM* that the team had originally envisioned. So it went back to the drawing board, returning to what the developer considers to be the foundations of the franchise: long-term growth, a tactical battlefield experience and the capture, research and ultimate conquest of alien technology.

It emerges now as a tactical firstperson shooter with *Mass Effect*-style squad management, letting you slow down the action at any point to take a considered look at the battlefield. Aliens react intelligently to the player character, quickly earmarking him as a primary target and forcing him to use his squad and the aliens' own technology to overcome troubling odds.

Capturing that technology gives the opportunity to deploy it immediately in the battlefield: we saw a plasma turret, a few handheld weapon types and a terrifyingly powerful terraforming machine called the Titan – which looks like a mechanical Eye of Sauron and sounds like an amplified dial-up modem. Alternatively, you can take it back to the base for research, yielding further benefits down the line.

Interesting and unusual though it is, this blend of firstperson shooting and thirdperson strategising doesn't yet look fluid. There's a definite tension between *XCOM*'s two personalities – playing it like a firstperson shooter is certain to result in failure, but playing it as a purely tactical squad game doesn't quite work either. It's not dissimilar to the tension that felled *Alpha Protocol*, a game that looked like a thirdperson shooter but whose mechanics were based on invisible dice rolls. How does *XCOM* hope to avoid this disconnect between form and content?

"That tension is definitely there," acknowledges creative director **Jordan Thomas**. "We're trying to avoid mistakes like creating an action experience that's based on a numbers game. In combat you're shooting bullets and doing damage in a way that's pretty standard [for firstperson shooters], but we collapse the tactical thinking down into a mode that separates you from the chaos so that you can absorb available opportunities and plan your approach. It is a tension, but it's an interesting one to have."

Thomas shows a comforting understanding of the principles of a series reboot, as the time that 2K Marin has taken to re-map *XCOM*'s direction demonstrates. "We didn't want to reimagine it in a way that wasn't differentiating," he states. "That would be the ultimate tragedy: reviving a franchise in a way that didn't really justify or validate it."



XCOM-munication

Videogames and films have played out the fight against alien invaders time and time again, but *XCOM*'s aliens still manage to send a shiver up the spine. Its extraterrestrial terror is closest to War Of The Worlds', mostly because it is seldom seen, manifesting itself through its technology rather than slavering jaws. It manages to evoke both unease and intrigue. "We wanted to achieve a very strong contrast between what you want to save and what threatens to destroy it," Thomas says. "A lot of people make things about aliens, and we wanted to set it apart. Part of what makes *XCOM* special is having a mysterious enemy."

TO INFINITE



AND BEYOND

Irrational's bracing new chapter in the BioShock saga promises to take players higher than ever before



Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher 2K Games
Developer Irrational Games
Release 2012

A Star Wars reference. A dying horse. Two people messing about in a gutted store interior. A solemn promise. It says something about the depth of imagination on display that after 15 minutes of chaotic aerial gunplay, flaming zeppelins and magically summoned crows, these are the memories of our *BioShock Infinite* demo that linger on.

Announced in 2010, *BioShock Infinite* marks Irrational Games' return to *BioShock*'s trademark highbrow historical violence, this time focusing on the suffocating jingoism and xenophobia of turn-of-the-century America. *Infinite* puts you in the shoes of a man named Booker DeWitt, a former agent of the American private detective agency known as Pinkertons. DeWitt has been sent to the floating city of Columbia to rescue a mysterious woman, Elizabeth, and escort her safely to New York City.

The demo begins peacefully enough, with DeWitt and Elizabeth looting their way through an abandoned building. Deep, rich colours fill the screen as DeWitt picks over littered bottles, discarded flags and barrels of fireworks. In the midst of the store, they discover a mattress and a collection of bottles and food containers. "Looks like some desperate fellow called this place home," mutters DeWitt under his breath. "What does that make us?" asks Elizabeth.

"The demos for us are a lab in a lot of ways," explains **Ken Levine**, creative director at Irrational Games. "We always say: 'What are the things that scare us the most? OK, we're doing that in the next demo.' For us, this time, it was just being with Elizabeth – not during a scripted moment, but just hanging out with her."

Back in the demo, our heroes continue to browse through the store. DeWitt pulls some money out of a cash register and picks up a working pistol before Elizabeth pulls him aside to show off her latest find. "Look!" she exclaims, holding up a tacky novelty trophy, "Real gold!" "That's gold like I'm the king of England," quips DeWitt, gently taking it from her and setting it aside.

Elizabeth continues to goof around, placing a large wooden Abe Lincoln mask over her head and dancing about, drawing involuntary chuckles from DeWitt. It's a surprisingly light-hearted sequence for a game bearing the *BioShock* moniker – the humour of this series has, after all, been almost entirely of the dark, ironic and blood-speckled variety.

Levine reveals that initially the demo began on a more action-packed note. "I'm sure my development team loved me when I said: 'You know what? What we're missing here is being in *BioShock*, hanging out and doing *BioShock* stuff. And what's more *BioShock* than going through an empty store and finding shit?'"

Suddenly, a rending shriek pierces the air and a green light bathes the entire store – something has arrived outside the shop, goliath and menacing. Elizabeth cowers behind a desk, her hands clapped over her mouth, her eyes wide with terror. Whatever this thing is that's coming, she knows it all too well.



Ken Levine creative director

A spotlight beam cuts abruptly through the room as DeWitt takes cover next to Elizabeth, just clear of its probing halo. The searchlight methodically combs the space, illuminating an ominous sign above the counter: "All sales are final". The light sweeps left... right... left... right, then with a burst of mechanical clatter and another terrifying cry, it vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

This is Songbird, a huge mechanical beast and one of the primary antagonists in *BioShock Infinite*. Songbird has held Elizabeth captive in a tower since she was five years old, and he is furious both at DeWitt for stealing her away, and at Elizabeth for leaving.

"They've got a very strange relationship," Levine offers. "Songbird is all Elizabeth knew, good and bad, and she's now saying she wants what we've all wanted as kids – to push away from the nest." He realises what he's just said and chuckles, "Yeah, 'the nest'" (see 'Building Songbird').

> **"WHAT'S MORE BIOSHOCK THAN GOING THROUGH AN EMPTY STORE AND FINDING SHIT?"**

A few moments after Songbird has flown, DeWitt and Elizabeth make for the exit. But before they can leave, she stops him. "Promise me," she says, and he interrupts her: "I will stop him."

"No," Elizabeth corrects him, her eyes locked with DeWitt's, "That is an oath you cannot keep. Promise me that if it comes to it," and now she slides his hand to her throat, her voice going hoarse with fear, "you will not let him take me back."

"It won't come to that," DeWitt assures her, sounding more hopeful than certain, and the two burst through the shop door out into the blinding sunlight of Columbia.

The floating city is most certainly *BioShock Infinite*'s defining feature; its screaming red flags and white stone buildings cut a fine form against the clear blue of the open sky. Columbia marks a deliberate departure from both Irrational's original *BioShock* and 2K Marin's *BioShock 2* – in fact, it seems difficult to imagine a more drastic shift than moving from the bottom of the ocean to the limitless expanse of the open sky.

When we decided to do *BioShock Infinite* and 'city in the sky', we didn't start with 'bright, sunny day'," says lead artist **Shawn Robertson**. "We built a couple of test maps that looked a lot like Rapture. Dark and cloudy, gloomy, green-tinged skies; even though it was floating in the sky, you couldn't really tell.

"And we realised that we were sort of doing the same thing over



BUILDING SONGBIRD

"We had a big challenge with Songbird," says Levine. "You had this iconic character. A friend of mine said to me: 'You know, [in *BioShock*] the Big Daddy was a god of the ocean, you need a god of the air'."

Robertson recalls: "Rob Lauder, the concept artist, created tons of designs for Songbird. We even got to the point that we built and animated a few in the engine. It wasn't until we got this sketch of Elizabeth reaching up to this creature, which wound up being used for a magazine cover, that we decided on one. It was a really quick gesture, there was hardly any detail to it at all, but everybody saw it and said: 'That was it. That's what we're going for'."



Fans of *BioShock*'s plasmids rejoice: *Infinite*'s tonics look to play much the same role, granting DeWitt supernatural abilities that he unleashes with his left hand. Shown here: Murder of Crows, which allows him to summon a flock of, well, murderous crows



Impossible aerial acrobatics are the order of the day, with large-scale battles regularly calling for vertigo-inducing 100-foot drops. "Ken comes up with the crazy concepts," says Gerritson, "and then I work with the team on how the hell we're going to make them happen"

again. Ken really pushed us to think about it differently; we started talking and thinking about American Exceptionalism, Main Street USA in Disneyworld, The Chicago World's Fair, and as we did the clouds went back, and the clouds went back. Our 'ah-ha' moment was the gazebo we built for the first demo at Gamescom, the grass field with the edge, and the bright blue sky. We said: 'That's it, that's what we should be going for, that Americana type of feel.'"

When we ask Robertson if Irrational has left the underwater world of Rapture behind once and for all, he sits silently for a moment before finally responding: "Never say never."

According to *BioShock Infinite*'s lore, Columbia predates Rapture by 60 years. It was built in the wake of the 1893 World's Fair, in the aftermath of America's successful debut on the world stage. A massive collection of floating streets and towers, Columbia was supposed to stand for and showcase the ingenuity and power of American industry and imagination. Unfortunately, things quickly went sour and Columbia seceded from the Union, declaring independence and spending the first years of the 20th century floating about the globe while imposing its will on the denizens of the lands below. In time, two factions vying for control of Columbia – the capitalistic Founders and the Vox Populi, a red-banded mob of revolutionaries – sent the floating city-state spiralling towards civil war. It is at this boiling point that DeWitt arrives in the city looking for Elizabeth.

Robertson reflects on the process of building an artistic vision for a city, only to destroy it. "It's fun to destroy things. Who wants to build a pristine thing that you don't get to add a little history to or destroy? Through the journey, as we're building these levels, we'll build a building that we may not necessarily want to be the final style of the city, but as we change, that building will stay in the level.

"If you walk down a street in New York City, there'll be some buildings that were built in the 1800s, there'll be some that were built in the '50s, and there'll be some that are modern. And that gives a history to the street. It's very easy to fall into making everything look like it was created at once, just because in essence you are creating everything at the same time."

Outside on the streets of Columbia, it quickly becomes clear that all is not well. The shining colours of the city overlay the sounds of chaos and burning, and a horse lies dying in a blasted central square ahead of our pair. A button prompt flashes onto the screen, 'Press X to Euthanize Horse.' Elizabeth runs up to its side, eager to help, offering to use her abilities to save the wounded beast. DeWitt protests – it's just an animal – but Elizabeth will have none of it. "I wasn't asking permission," she says calmly, before going to work.

The emotions playing across Elizabeth's face are remarkable. "Somebody just asked me," says Levine, "'Do you want to go in a hyperrealistic direction?' And I don't think that's the right thing for this game. You would need to see Elizabeth from 20 feet away, and her face needs to be read. The exaggeration of her face helps with that."

A flickering circle explodes from Elizabeth's hands, creating a glowing ring around both her and the horse. Within the circle, an alternate reality becomes apparent: the horse heals and changes colour,

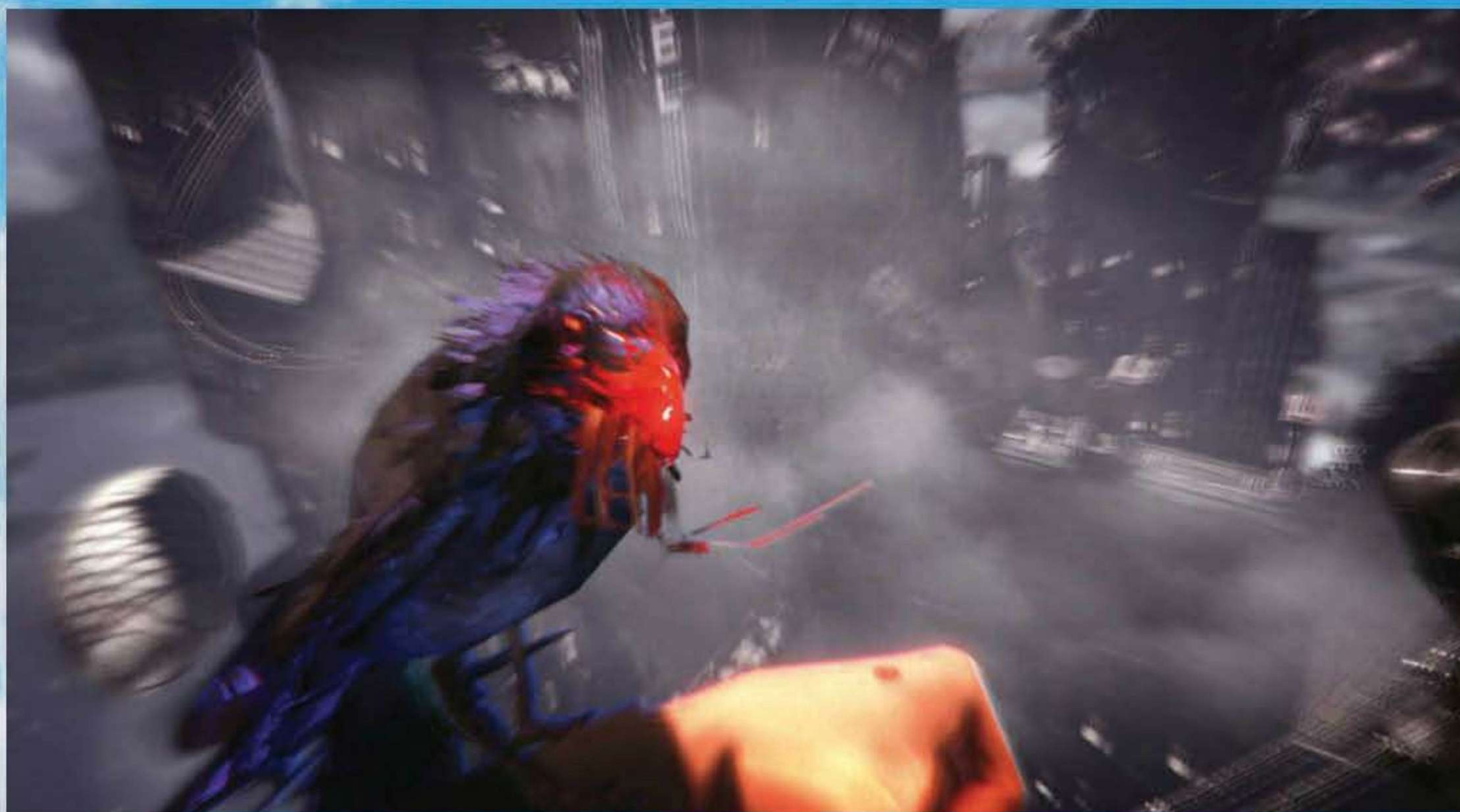


Shawn Robertson
lead artist

BIOSHOCK INFINITE



When asked if the game is presenting any political commentary with its oppressive patriotic pageantry, Gerritson explains: "We were trying to create something that felt endemic of the time"



With the bending of spacetime, not to mention magic tonics and a flying city, *Infinite* feels primed to live up to its title. Levine: "Marketing departments don't name our games. We name our games"



Steve Gaynor
senior level designer

and the grass is in full bloom; Elizabeth has ripped a seam in the fabric of reality, and we are seeing the other side. But as quickly as it opened, she loses her grasp, and it snaps shut. Stubbornly, she attempts for a second time and tears a bigger hole, this one leading out on to a city street.

And not just any city street: it's a street from 80 years in the future, complete with streetlights and a movie marquee reading 'Revenge Of The Jedi'. Both DeWitt and Elizabeth are dumbfounded, staring into the future with no means with which to comprehend what they're seeing. A ringing siren grows louder and louder as headlights pierce the darkness. A fire engine screeches into view, bearing down on Elizabeth and the portal she has created. "Close it! Close it!" shouts DeWitt, and an instant later she does; the siren vanishes and with it the street scene. "I can't control it," Elizabeth moans. "It's not possible."

"After what just happened," DeWitt muses in response to her, "do you really want to take bets on what's possible?"

It's a bravura sequence. We have yet to see even a single moment of combat, but *BioShock Infinite* has already demonstrated more creative chutzpah than an entire E3's worth of camouflage-clad sniper teams and war-torn cities.

Levine is quick to point out that DeWitt and Elizabeth would be as shocked by this development as we were. "These were people born in the 19th century. It's similar to how, in the first *BioShock*, Tenenbaum and Suchong were tapping into the science of the time, [namely] what Crick and Watson were discovering with the DNA strand. If you look at this period of time – 1912, the turn of the 20th century – you had the notion of what the universe was, which physics was completely changing.

"You look at Heisenberg, and you look at Einstein, and we still are grappling with what they started to tap into, we still don't really understand it in any meaningful way. Very possibly, the understanding we have of what anything is, what we're experiencing here, of how one minute passes to the next, is like that cat in the box [the famous thought experiment known as Schrodinger's Cat], and that's such fascinating stuff. Elizabeth's not a scientist, but she's tapping into that."

Of course, Elizabeth's powers won't be relegated to non-combat functions; she is quite formidable in a firefight as well. We get to see that in action as DeWitt and Elizabeth come upon a group of Vox Populi soldiers preparing to execute a postal worker for his role working for the Founders. A button-prompt allows DeWitt to intervene: "He's just a postman! He didn't hurt anybody!" The Vox Populi recognise DeWitt, and soon gunfire explodes from all sides.

As DeWitt runs about the area shooting and dodging, various translucent objects appear in the environment, each of which Elizabeth can will into existence. Our hero isn't without some supernatural abilities of his own – he has at his disposal a wealth of left-hand-assigned powers called 'tonics' which are, for all intents and purposes, identical to *BioShock*'s plasmids. He launches a flock of crows from his left hand while opening fire with his right, then switches tonics and levitates a group of soldiers.

COMBAT HAS THE SAME CHAOTIC FEEL AS PREVIOUS BIOSHOCKS, WITH NO COVER TO BE FOUND

"Elizabeth – now!" he cries, and she magics a train carriage on to a nearby rail, crushing the levitating foes.

Combat has the same loose, chaotic feel as the first two *BioShock* games, with no cover to be found and enemies attacking from all sides. In short order, one of the Vox Populi manages to launch a flare, summoning a massive battle-zeppelin emblazoned with the words "Our voice will be heard!" It begins to rain down fire as DeWitt leaps from building to building, picking up a rocket launcher and loosing a few missiles its way before deciding to change tactics.

"Don't move," he instructs Elizabeth, "I'll be right back!" And with that, he brandishes the metal sky-hook attached to his left wrist and leaps on to a nearby Sky-Line train.

Imagine a roller-coaster ride with no train of cars attached, snaking high above a city, miles above the nearest cloud. Lights blur and bullets fly as its rider whizzes up and down, unhooking and dropping between rails, drawing closer to the zeppelin as enemies give chase. It's so beautifully chaotic that it seems choreographed, almost as though the



OH, THE HUMANITY

One complaint about *BioShock* was that the tragic characters overheard on the audio diaries felt disconnected from the psychotic splicers roaming Rapture's halls. This was addressed in 2K Marin's *BioShock 2*, which built an engaging father-daughter relationship into its main narrative. *BioShock 2* DLC *Minerva's Den* continued this tradition, telling the tale of a bereaved computer scientist's love for his deceased wife. With the addition of Elizabeth and our speaking protagonist, Booker DeWitt, *BioShock Infinite* appears to have learned a great deal from the earlier games in the series. No huge surprise, given that *Minerva's Den* lead writer/designer Steve Gaynor has moved from 2K Marin to Irrational. "I played *Minerva's Den* and I said, 'We gotta get this guy!'" says Levine.



The civil war tearing Columbia apart is being fought between the powerful, capitalistic Founders and an idealistic but rough collective called the Vox Populi



BETTER THAN FLYING

Executive producer **Tim Gerritson** explains the origins of the Sky-Line…

How did you come up with the concept?
They started out as a very simple concept, almost too simple. It was basically a zipline. We showed a primitive version and Ken said: "Look, I want to ride a fuckin' roller-coaster at a hundred miles an hour with a gun in my hand." That was his vision.

Sounds tricky.
We got it visually, but I felt like if we made a zipline or a rail-ride it would suck. It had to open up a whole new world of possibilities. So we had to create a system where you could go from line to line to roof to line, and if a zeppelin flies underneath, you can jump onto it…

Did it take long?
We iterated a lot, and we failed quite often. We wanted to kill the feature so many times. But eventually it all just snapped together. It felt real, visceral, like: "I'm dropping hundreds of storeys at 100 miles an hour and it's crazy!"

player at the controls could not possibly be having any input into the events taking place on the screen.

Getting *BioShock Infinite*'s network of functional Sky-Lines to look and feel right was a monumental challenge, says Levine. "The Sky-Lines were something that we just beat on and beat on. I think humans are a bit conservative in terms of how they think about ideas, in terms of how they push them. The line we have at Irrational is, 'Push it too far, because if you don't push it too far you won't know where the boundary is to pull back to.'"

"The Sky-Lines originally were sort of like those kiddie roller-coasters that go around in a circle, and maybe have a tiny little hill," remembers Levine. "We kept pushing it and pushing it and finally we had the verticality of the space. It was really important to us that it we didn't make it like the AC-130 sequence [in *Modern Warfare*], where you go off and do the Sky-Line sequence. It's integrated into the level, and it's a choice within the level."

Finally DeWitt makes it to the deck of the zeppelin. After blasting his way into the engine room he detonates the boilers, before making a stomach-tightening dive onto a Sky-Line train hundreds of feet below that, barely catching himself on it as the zeppelin explodes above him.

Levine makes it clear that this is but one of the ways that DeWitt could have dealt with the zeppelin. "Booker could have sat there and shot down the zeppelin with a gun, or he could have used the rockets, or if Elizabeth was ready, she could have brought



Tim Gerritson executive producer

in a turret… or he could have shot it down with a pistol! It's like in *Star Wars: Battlefront II* – I loved the fact that you could shoot the capitol ships down with your X-Wing or you could actually go into the ship and take it down from the inside.

"It's not a boss level. The security gets called in, but it's all in the simulation – you take the Sky-Lines up and you deal with them. Or you don't, or you shoot them down with guns, or whatever. Or you use various powers on other people and they shoot it down for you. It's the *BioShock* thing."

DeWitt lands after his feat and joins back up with Elizabeth, and they make their way towards the shelter of a nearby building. "Booker!" she gushes, "That was amazing!" We must say that we agree with her. And yet, even with the zeppelin destroyed and the Vox Populi defeated, one obvious foe remains: Songbird. The winged mechanical

> "HUMANS ARE A BIT CONSERVATIVE IN HOW THEY PUSH IDEAS. OUR LINE IS: PUSH THEM TOO FAR"

monster shrieks back into the scene, tearing the roof off of the building and grabbing DeWitt, effortlessly throwing him to the ground before closing in for the kill.

"Stop it, don't hurt him!" cries Elizabeth, trying and failing to get Songbird's attention, "Stop it! I'm sorry!" Finally the bird pauses and turns to her. "I never should have left. I never should have left. Take me back. Take me home." The scene walks a teetering highwire act, and you can feel the tension hanging thick over the demo room.

"I worked with the animator John Mangagil a lot on that scene," says Levine, "and I kept saying to John: 'Have you ever been in a fight with your girlfriend where she's not looking at you, and she's turning away, and you're trying to get in her eyeline?'

"Every scene's got an antagonist and a protagonist, and Elizabeth in this moment is the protagonist, she needs [Songbird] to do something. She needs him to listen to her and take her back, because she has to save Booker. She needs to get in Songbird's eyeline, and he's turning away. You have this giant 30-foot-tall bird being the hurt party in the relationship, and in order to make that work without looking silly, it has to go back to something real."

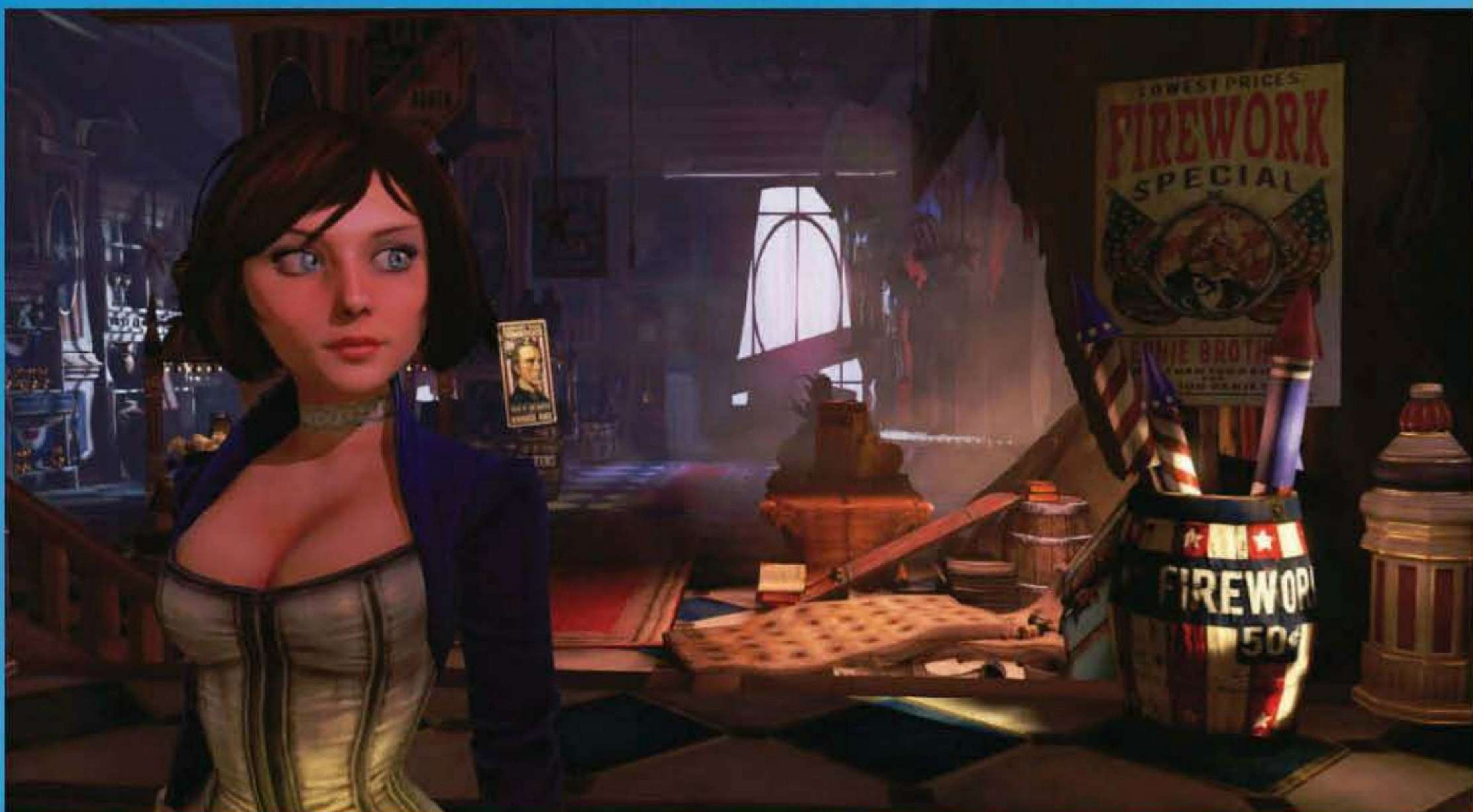
In the moment, it does feel real: Elizabeth has sworn that being



Infinite's rogues gallery will be a touch more diverse than *BioShock*'s occasionally repetitive mixture of splicers and roaming Big Daddies. In addition to Songbird, Columbia will be populated with a variety of NPCs as well as powerful 'Alphas' like Mr Handy here



bit.ly/mjz67X
Screenshot gallery



Levine says that he wanted to avoid hyperrealism for *Infinite*'s character design. "We need players to see Elizabeth from 20 feet away, and read her face. The exaggeration helps with that"

held captive by Songbird is a fate worse than death, and yet she is accepting that fate in a bid to save DeWitt. When Songbird finally listens to her sobbed apology, he regards her, cocks his head, then grabs her in one claw and takes flight.

As Elizabeth is lifted away, her tear-filled eyes meet yours. DeWitt's hands come up to hers, and their fingers almost meet... but then she is pulled away as Songbird lifts into the air and out of sight. Scarcely pausing for breath, DeWitt readies his sky-hook, dashes to the edge of the precipice and leaps out after them, the scream of the wind and the blinding blue sky tearing past. He catches hold of the Sky-Line and the screen fades to black; the demo is over.

"I like putting these very personal stories in," reveals Levine. "With Booker and Elizabeth, the fact that she's at the centre of everything, she's the thing that everybody wants and that they think is gonna solve their problems, but all she wants is to live her life and control her destiny. And Booker, who thinks he knows everything about everybody, who doesn't want anything of the world – he's given up on the world.

"He's the opposite of [Elizabeth]. Her heart is full of ache and hunger, and his heart is full of ash. And what they do to each other, how they change each other, and more importantly, if the player can put himself into Booker, Booker's a vehicle for the player to experience this. If we can't reach out to the player, to make a connection between Elizabeth and the player, then I think we fail."

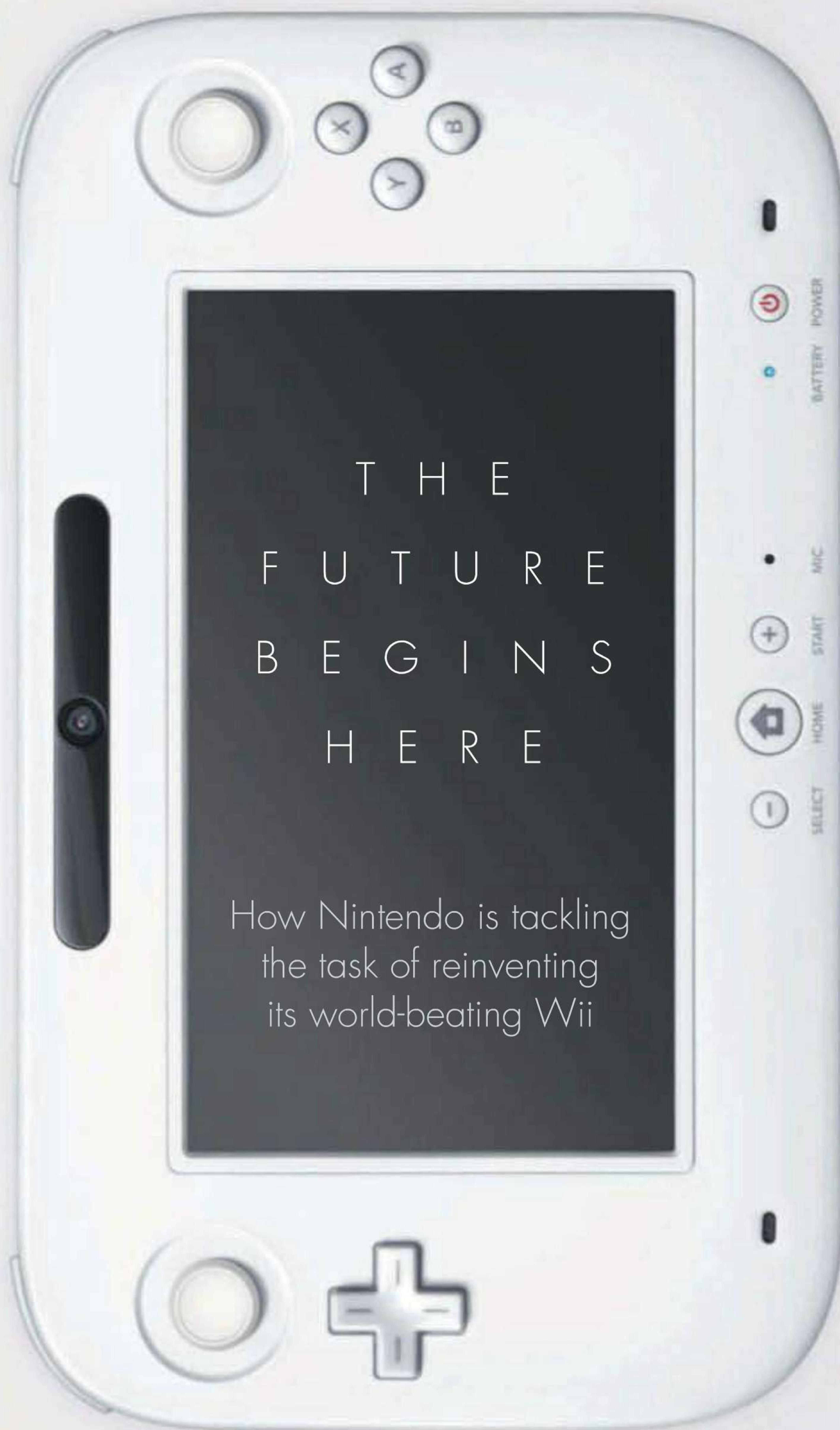


DeWitt and Elizabeth seek answers from Comstock, the mysterious figure at the head of civil war faction The Founders

Consider it a good sign that in the 15 minutes that Levine and Irrational had to make an impression, we came away feeling connected to the story, the world, the characters – all of it. *BioShock Infinite* weaves a fantastical tale of clashing ideals, historical science fiction and rip-roaring action, but at its heart it appears to be a very human story, centred on characters who feel vulnerable and real.

We may not have been at the controls when we watched the sequence, but when Songbird took Elizabeth away, there was really only one thing to do. With an audacity matched only by Ken Levine and his team at Irrational, we felt perfectly willing to swallow our vertigo, run to the edge of the world and leap after her. ■





THE FUTURE BEGINS HERE

How Nintendo is tackling the task of reinventing its world-beating Wii

For Sony and Microsoft, plotting out the directions for their most recent pieces of console hardware may not have been their most difficult work to date. With worldwide console sales of over 86 million units to date, Nintendo's Wii appeared to signal that success in the modern-day gaming landscape is all about motion control, so why shouldn't the company's competitors follow its lead? Despite their distinctions, Kinect and Move thus felt less like pure innovations and more like strategically deployed reactions. In contrast, Nintendo's task of coming up with a successor to its trailblazing Wii platform was a challenge of an entirely different magnitude.

The company's solution, Wii U, is inventive and safe simultaneously. Inventive because it's an attempt to marry a tablet-style experience with a traditional console environment, and safe because it is backwardly compatible with all existing Wii software and peripherals. Though the motion-control element at the heart of the original system remains in place – and indeed was fundamental to several Wii U demos during E3 – it's what the new controller offers that Nintendo expects to move the goal posts. Chiefly, the addition of a new method of interacting with Nintendo games is about keeping your relationship with the hardware a close, and enduring, one – hopefully ensuring that millions of Wii U consoles won't end up packed away alongside neglected Wiis in under-stairs cupboards once that initial tingle of new-hardware excitement has passed.

"When we were creating the Wii we definitely made one of our priorities, our goals, to create a system everyone in the family could touch every day in a shared space, and have a good time enjoying each others' company and sharing that experience," explains **Katsuya Eguchi** of Nintendo's Entertainment and Analysis Division. "After the Wii was released we kind of watched the patterns of play – how families and friends were playing with the system. We noticed that in the beginning, when it's fresh and new, everyone's getting involved and having a great time, but after a while people get tired of playing the same games all the time. And gradually people started moving away from actually interacting with their Wiis. We noticed that one of the obstacles to getting them to play again was actually having to turn the TV on, then turning the Wii on, and then waiting a while before actually getting in and being able to engage in the activity. When creating the Wii U we wanted to eliminate all those obstacles and also eliminate another obstacle, which was not being able to play while someone was watching TV. So that's where the screen on the new controller came from."

One of Wii U's most unexpected innovations is certainly the controller's ability to perform as a self-contained display for whenever a TV set is not available. At 6.2 inches, the tablet-like peripheral's screen is large enough, and of a high enough fidelity (Nintendo has yet to announce its precise resolution), to perform convincingly with both the super-colourful environments of E3 demo title *New Super Mario Bros Mii* and the more muted and significantly more geometrically complex world of Hyrule as depicted in the E3 demo entitled 'HD experience'. Since the Wii U pad features a Remote sensor, it's fully compatible with traditional Wii controllers too. Suddenly there's no need to kit out a spare bedroom with a television in order to use it as a modest gaming room: everything you need to play Wii U games and the entire Wii back catalogue is provided in the box.

Which isn't to say that Nintendo will be encouraging users to forego traditional displays when playing with its new system. Why, after all, would Wii U be capable of HD visuals if they weren't intended to be viewed on an expansive plasma/LCD/LED panel? In truth, the full-HD portrayal of *Zelda*'s Link encountering a spider boss the size of a wedding marquee doesn't make your knees go quite as wobbly as you might expect. Gaming's hi-definition era began nearly six years ago, after all, and in visual terms Wii U is more about Nintendo getting up to speed with its competitors than it is blasting far ahead of them.



A more rounded form factor immediately distinguishes Wii U from its parent. It's more user-friendly, too, with larger controls all round and a more conveniently located Sync button

HARD DATA

When it comes to Wii U specs, Nintendo is keeping certain cards close to its chest. If you want to prepare some shelf space, though, some of the official data will help:

Size (base unit): approx 1.8"x6.8"x10.5"
Size (controller): approx 5.3"x9.0"x0.9"
CPU: IBM Power-based multi-core processor
GPU: AMD Radeon-based 'high-definition' unit
Memory: Unspecified amount of flash-based memory, with option to expand via SD card or external USB hard drive
Media: 12cm proprietary hi-density optical disc, plus traditional Wii optical disc
Video out: 1080p/1080i/720p/480p/480i via HDMI/component/S-video/component cable
Audio out: six-channel PCM linear output via HDMI
Ports: 4 x USB2.0, 1 x SD memory card

In terms of rendering visuals, no one can – or is officially willing to – say precisely how Wii U compares to Xbox 360 and PS3, although during E3 we heard from several sources that it's capable of performance in the region of Sony's machine – and without requiring so much jumping through hoops from developers, thanks to its more straightforward system architecture. From Nintendo's perspective, though, such comparisons don't hold much interest. "As far as specs are concerned, I don't think it's really necessary to compare specs among different consoles because they all have different features, different benefits to holding and playing, different experiences offered," Eguchi says. "When we look at Wii U, I understand that numbers are important, but I can also look at what is available for this system that isn't available for any of the others."

Clearly Eguchi isn't talking only about Wii U's specific hardware innovations. Nintendo famously has a broader range of proven, beloved IP than any other firstparty publisher, and there's no doubt that the biggest names in its roster will be given a workout on the new platform. Seeing Nintendo's legendary attention to detail applied on a more ambitious scale in the HD *Zelda* mock-up is, on its own, enough to make the average Nintendo follower melt. The next *Pikmin* will appear on Wii U, and it's difficult to escape the feeling that, in terms of visual fidelity alone, it's the platform the series has been waiting for. Then there's a new *Super Smash Bros*, and no doubt another *Metroid* is in the works, along with a new Mario adventure, all of it wrapped in a crisp shell unfamiliar to Nintendo IP.

This time around, though, the story is supposed to be as much about what thirdparty developers will bring to the platform as it is Nintendo's own contributions. The paucity of high-quality thirdparty Wii productions has been a constant issue since the console was introduced nearly five years ago, and during E3 Nintendo made a particularly loud noise in announcing the support of publishers like Ubisoft, Sega, Tecmo Koei, Codemasters, Namco Bandai and EA. At the time of writing, however, it's only Ubisoft that has talked in any real detail about how it's making use of Wii U's distinct qualities, with the likes of system-exclusive FPS *Killer Freaks From Outer Space*, which uses the controller's motion-sensing capacity to control your view of the action, and a dedicated version of *Ghost Recon Online* that uses the pad's screen for map data and its built-in mic for communication with other players.

How the likes of Codemasters' bespoke instalment of the *Dirt* series and Tecmo Koei's *Ninja Gaiden 3* will translate to Wii U is open to question, but it's easy to see the appeal of Sega's *Aliens: Colonial Marines* featuring a authentic-feeling motion tracker, along with EA's raft of sports games using the touchscreen for all sorts of strategy-related considerations. All of the Wii U games based on



existing projects on other formats will, at least, be able to offer gameplay and presentation features that are simply not an option in the 360 and PS3 iterations, even if, at the very simplest level, it's a shifting of HUD details from the TV screen to the one in your hands. For the examples that come to market later than their 360 and PS3 counterparts, the extent of their distinguishing factors will be surely be a key factor in their ability to attract an audience.

Will the option of moving a controller around you in order to change your view of the action in a firstperson shooter be a viable, long-term replacement for simply using your thumb to push an analogue stick? For full-on competitive play, possibly not, even despite the responsiveness of the Wii U controller's motion-sensing tech, which doesn't flinch when we swing it around during our time with E3 demo game *Shield Pose*. There is something like a magical sensation, however, when we get the opportunity to use the controller as a window into the demo depicting a bird traversing a Japanese landcape, our view of the delicious, delicate Unreal Engine-powered environment shifting in accordance to where we point it.

"That feeling of looking through a screen or a window and having your movements affect what's on that screen is something I don't think people have experienced before, so I do think it will change the way people will play games," Eguchi says. "The gyroscope is very important to Wii U. The combination of a touchscreen and the gyroscope happened for the first time with 3DS, and taking the example of *Starfox 64 3DS*, you don't have to use the button controls to move; you can turn your body to turn your ship. It's definitely a more direct experience and it's definitely changed controllability. And because this is the first time this screen has appeared on a console, I feel it will dramatically change the whole console experience, in the same way that the gyroscope and touchscreen changed handheld gaming."

"I don't think it's necessary for all Wii U games to use all of its features, including the touchscreen"

Despite the dual Circle Pads and the placement of shoulder buttons and triggers on the Wii U controller, then, there is no question that this new platform is as focused on motion-sensitive input as its predecessor. Even as we're trying to get our heads around where this might be taking us, though, Eguchi wants to establish that there shouldn't be such a thing as a typical Wii U game. With the hardware offering such a far-reaching range of possibilities, perhaps there can't be. Should we expect touchscreen compatibility across all titles? "I don't think it's necessary for any and all developers working on software for the Wii U to make use of all of its features, including the touchscreen," Eguchi



Ubisoft's FPS *Killer Freaks From Outer Space* is one of the few thirdparty Wii U games announced to date that demonstrates how the system's unique controller will be used to put a spin on a traditional formula. In multiplayer, participants can use Classic Controllers against a 'game master' who uses a top-down view on the Wii U controller's screen to spawn enemies

asserts. "Regardless of whether it's a Nintendo developer or a thirdparty developer, if it makes sense for the game to make use of the touchscreen, I hope they take advantage of that. If it doesn't, I hope they don't. But it is one of the unique offerings among all of the consoles available out there, so if it does give a distinct flavour to the Nintendo version of a game, then I hope they utilise that to its fullest."



Motion-based response is one of the key Wii U elements Nintendo will be pushing. Though it's heavier than a traditional Remote, moving the new controller around is no enormous exertion

Before you pick it up, the Wii U controller suggests that it's going to be something of a handful. It's quite a bit larger than a standard joypad, and the presence of a screen, along with prior experience with tablet computing devices of various stripes, makes you anticipate it will be heavier than it proves to be. However, since the shell is constructed of plastic, and the processing that is generating the imagery on its screen is happening within the Wii U base unit and merely piped to the controller wirelessly, it's surprisingly lightweight, making for an experience that feels entirely manageable – at least from our relatively short time playing around with it. For it to be a fundamental part of a system that is intended to have the broad crossover appeal to match its predecessor, though, it may yet be refined further. "We're in the process of testing it," Eguchi reveals. "It's heavier than other Wii controllers so we're thinking about long-term use, how long people can hold it, and in what position. If you hold it straight up, you'll get tired more quickly than if it's on your knees, for example. We're looking at the games and software we're producing and trying to figure out what is the best way to position the controller – whether for certain applications it should be on the table, etc."

"We really want to see this new controller become something every member of the family uses"



Like a DS/3DS display, the Wii U touchscreen can be operated with fingers or a stylus (which slides into the unit when not in use). Its lack of multi-touch functionality is presumably a cost-related issue

Wherever it's placed, there's no question that it will draw attention, and its particular charms mean that if it's in your hands during a multiplayer session that involves other participants using Wii Remotes, you'll feel very much the centre of attention. Indeed, several of Nintendo's E3 demos go to great lengths in demonstrating how the controller's unique qualities can be put to use in this way. Which begs the question: will getting hands on the unique controller always be the preserve of one player? Isn't there any way that multiple devices could be used simultaneously for the same game? "I can't make any official statements in response to that," Eguchi says. "But as a software developer myself I definitely think it would be a lot of fun to be able to engage in versus play using multiple units of the new controller, so I can't say that it's out of the question. It's definitely something that could be tried."

More pressing right now, though, is the need to communicate what Nintendo hopes is the new hardware's broad appeal, ensnaring those who turned their backs on Nintendo when the HD era arrived while simultaneously talking to the broader market that has brought the company so much fortune since the arrival of Wii in 2006.

"We really want to see this new controller become an essential part of every living room, something every member of the family interacts with," Eguchi asserts. "For example, it would be wonderful if mothers take the controller into the kitchen and interact with the kids who are playing in the living room. Or interact with other members of the family through the controller – not just for gameplay but for other uses."

Video chat is one application which promises to give Wii U relevance and value within a modern-day family household. It's features such as this, along with the ability to view not just games on the controller's screen but applications such as a Web browser, that have led some to accuse Nintendo of simply chasing the tablet computer market with its new platform. It's a charge that Eguchi dismisses. "I can understand why people may think [that we could be competing with Apple], because it does look the same – the controller has a screen on it, much like a tablet PC – but if you think about it, the uses are very different," he says. "Tablets are mainly for one user – they're a very personal thing: one tablet, one user. But our goal for Wii U is for it to be in the living room, where multiple people often enjoy watching TV, and this new controller is intended to change that, to change how people interact with TV, interact with games, and interact with each other. So I'm hoping it won't just be a personal item like a tablet computer."

By the time Wii U launches next year, it seems likely that Sony or Microsoft, or possibly both companies, will have fired off responses to Nintendo's attempt to establish the ground rules for the next generation of videogame hardware. Can either company come up with anything as potentially disruptive as Nintendo's solution? Will they take an even bigger beating this time around if they don't?

As always, success will be all about the level of engagement with the audience. With the original Wii offering, Nintendo captured the attention of a new audience only to witness the love affair wane over time. Simultaneously, it lost credibility in the eyes of many traditional gamers. Bringing all of them back via Wii U will be a daunting challenge, but it has assembled some ingenious tools with which to focus its efforts.

WII U IN ACTION

In threeplayer game *Battle Mii* 1, two hunters wielding Remotes and Nunchuks try to shoot down a UFO piloted by the player using the Wii U controller. The tablet's accelerometers prove perfectly capable of precision aiming as every minor nudge registers onscreen. Silently stalking the spaceport arena (the demo is drawn in a cutesy *Metroid* style) and picking off helpless saps below provides plenty of malicious giggles. In *Shield Pose* 2, you deflect arrows by pointing the Wii U controller in their direction. Manoeuvring the handheld screen around the world seen on the static TV reveals a 360-degree ocean patrolled by rival ships. In action, *Shield Pose* unfolds like a *Rhythm Tengoku* minigame, catching arrows on the beat before dislodging them with a pleasingly tactile flick.





1





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4

Chase Mii 3 sees four Remote-wielding chasers share a splitscreen TV in pursuit of an escapee armed with the Wii U controller. The private screen shows the position of the four hunters, allowing a cunning player to avoid capture. It's the kind of thrill usually confined to online play, amplified by the proximity of the would-be captors, and fans of *Pac-Man Vs* will feel instantly at home. Simple Wii assets hardly push Wii U's HD capabilities in *New Super Mario Bros Mii* 4, though extra horsepower enables the camera to zoom out until four co-op buddies are mere specks among a grand mess of coins, swaying pillars and goomba platoons. As fun as it will be to see Chuck Norris rubbing shoulders with Luigi, we expect more from a next-gen *Mario* than Mii support. No doubt it's in the works.

It's only a demo, but this *Zelda* setup shows how Nintendo expects to see traditional game interfaces evolve on Wii U







Q&A: Katsuya Eguchi

With both old-school classics including *Super Mario Bros 3* and modern-day hits such as *Wii Sports* on his CV, **Katsuya Eguchi** has seen all sorts of action since he joined Nintendo in 1986. We catch up with him to discuss the opportunities and challenges involved in creating a new gaming platform.

How important was it that Wii U was related to the original Wii, and that 'Wii' was in its name?
There are actually several reasons for us wanting to make Wii U part of the Wii family, to make that connection. In hindsight, looking at Wii U and its features we realised that there were also things [with Wii] that we weren't able to accomplish with that system, that we would have liked to see in it. Wii U is kind of the natural progression in looking at what we did, how we changed gaming. This is the next logical step for us and we wanted to convey that in the name. In addition to that there are many Wii users out there – and we are very appreciative of this – who invested in lots of peripherals, such as more Remotes, Balance Boards, Classic Controllers, and they can continue to use these peripherals with Wii U as well. We wanted to make sure they understood that.

"Wii U is kind of the natural progression in looking at what we did, how we changed gaming"

The best Wii games are famously made by Nintendo – what can you do to help thirdparties make better Wii U games?
Of course we'll support them technically, giving any development assistance they require, but each thirdparty has their proven franchises – the franchises that have done really well for them and I'm hoping they'll be open to hearing suggestions, ideas from Nintendo on how to really take advantage of the Wii U's features and offer the public maybe a different spin on those already proven franchises.

Do you expect the first round of Wii U games to be based on new IP or established characters and series?
Of course, with those fan-favourite IPs, we'll continue to offer games based on those characters, in those worlds, with the Wii U. But if there are opportunities for us to come up with new IPs that work well with this new system we'll jump on those as well.

Will Wii U represent a growth in digitally delivery, or will you remain focused on games delivered on disc?
That's a very good question. I think people are getting more comfortable with downloading content digitally and accessing experiences that way so we can't ignore that. We will do that with the Wii U as well, but I think the traditional way of acquiring merchandise – physically going into the store – that's something that people also enjoy doing and we'll continue that as well.

Will you be introducing a large amount of Wii U games that can only be played on the controller's screen?
Being able to play games on the touchscreen that are normally played on the TV is one of the basic features of Wii U. Another way that Wii U can be used is to display the images on the TV screen and on the touchscreen. There are many, many different ways that developers can create games for Wii U. Another application that I can foresee is – there are consoles at the moment that always have the TV on, watching movies or TV shows – but if there's a really simple game that kids want to play, that's another application for the touchscreen.

During the development of Wii U, was there a particular eureka moment at which point everyone involved felt like they'd made a breakthrough?
A very key part of the new controller is the screen. You saw the video at E3 of the Zapper with the controller perched on top of it: when we were testing that, and playing around with it, we realised that in terms of an FPS, it had changed the way we were interacting with it and how much closer it felt. That was one of the moments that made us very happy and excited.

Communicating 3DS's unique qualities has been tricky; presumably those challenges will continue with Wii U.
You're absolutely right, those are just some of the huge challenges ahead of us – getting people to really understand what Wii U can offer. We have some experiences here right now – with 'Chase Mii' and 'Shield Pose' – and we have a great opportunity to give people time to play the games, so we'll take advantages of expos, conferences and in-store demos, but we really want people to understand how the TV screen and controller screen interact and how that changes the experience. And we've come up with a variety of uses. But you're right, we can't explain them all, and I don't even think we've thought of them all. I'm sure there are many uses that haven't been thought of yet. ■



Katsuya Eguchi has a spread of legendary Nintendo games on his CV, including *Super Mario World, Star Fox, Wave Race 64* and the *Animal Crossing* series

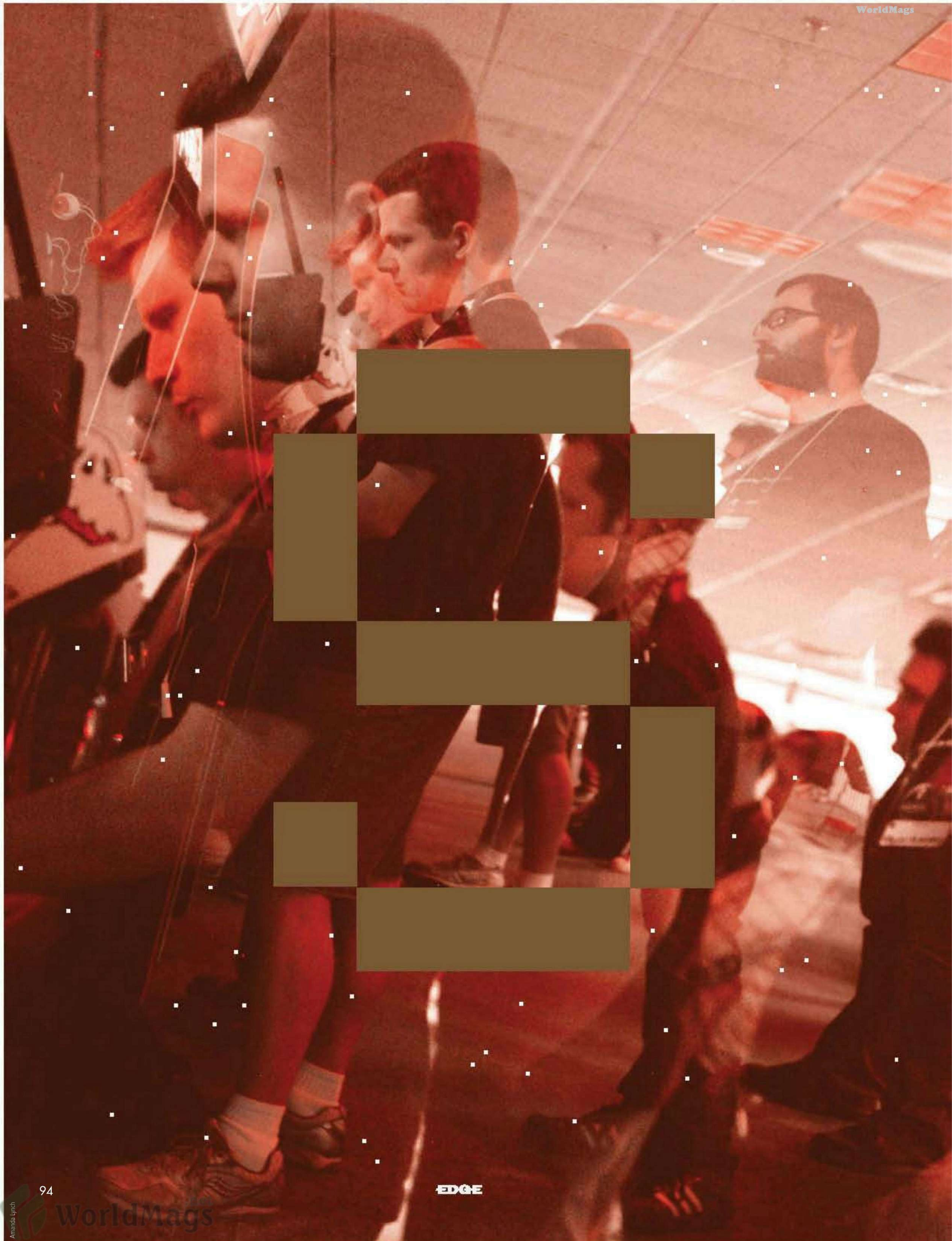
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VISITING THE 2011
TOURNAMENT, WE GO
TRUTH BEHIND THE
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FIRE

CLASSIC VIDEO GAME IN SEARCH OF THE KING OF KONG'S OF THE VINTAGE UNDERGROUND...



Amanda Lynch

Over 160 gamers turned out for this year's tournament at The American Classic Arcade Museum, and logged 4,043 high scores over the course of the competition on specially selected arcade cabinets. To qualify, they had to log a high score on all 15 titles

SURROUNDED BY THE gutted shells of arcade cabinets and racks crammed with circuit boards and monitors, **Gary Vincent** hurriedly prepares for the weekend. The bespectacled 50-year-old moves quickly through the workshop, deftly stepping over toolboxes and pinball backboards. Taking a moment to gesture to the opened machine behind him, he explains: "They tend to break down a lot. They're old. You can go through them all you want, cap the monitors, put new power supplies in them and cart them out to the floor. Next day, they're out of order. It's just the nature of the beast."

For Vincent, the maintenance and upkeep of the 300 functioning games in the American Classic Arcade Museum is an ongoing concern. Completely open to the public to play, the collection of well-weathered machines has to withstand the annual flood of tourists that arrive in Laconia, New Hampshire, every summer. Year after year, spilled drinks, abusive preteens and the slow grind of time itself wear the machines down. This, says Vincent, is expected. But in a little under 48 hours, gamers from all corners of the United States and beyond will converge in Laconia to compete on these antique electronics in a four-day-long high-score showdown: the International Video Game Tournament. In a contest of precision and reflexes, Vincent says, mechanical failure is unacceptable.

Maintenance considerations are only a part of the logistics underpinning the tournament. Months before the competition begins, the museum selects 15 titles from the hundreds of machines on the floor. "We have to pay attention to everything, really do research into the games we pick," says **Mike Stulir**, a board member of the museum. Games are selected on the basis of their obscurity, challenge and susceptibility to exploits. The board's selections are kept secret up until the day the tournament begins. Vincent explains that this precaution allows for a level playing field for contestants. Even with two more days to go before the event kicks off, competitors have been trying to pry information from the museum's employees. "There's only three of us that know what the games are going to be for the tournament because, just as you saw, people will come in and pump employees for information to see if they can get the tournament list."



Brian Post

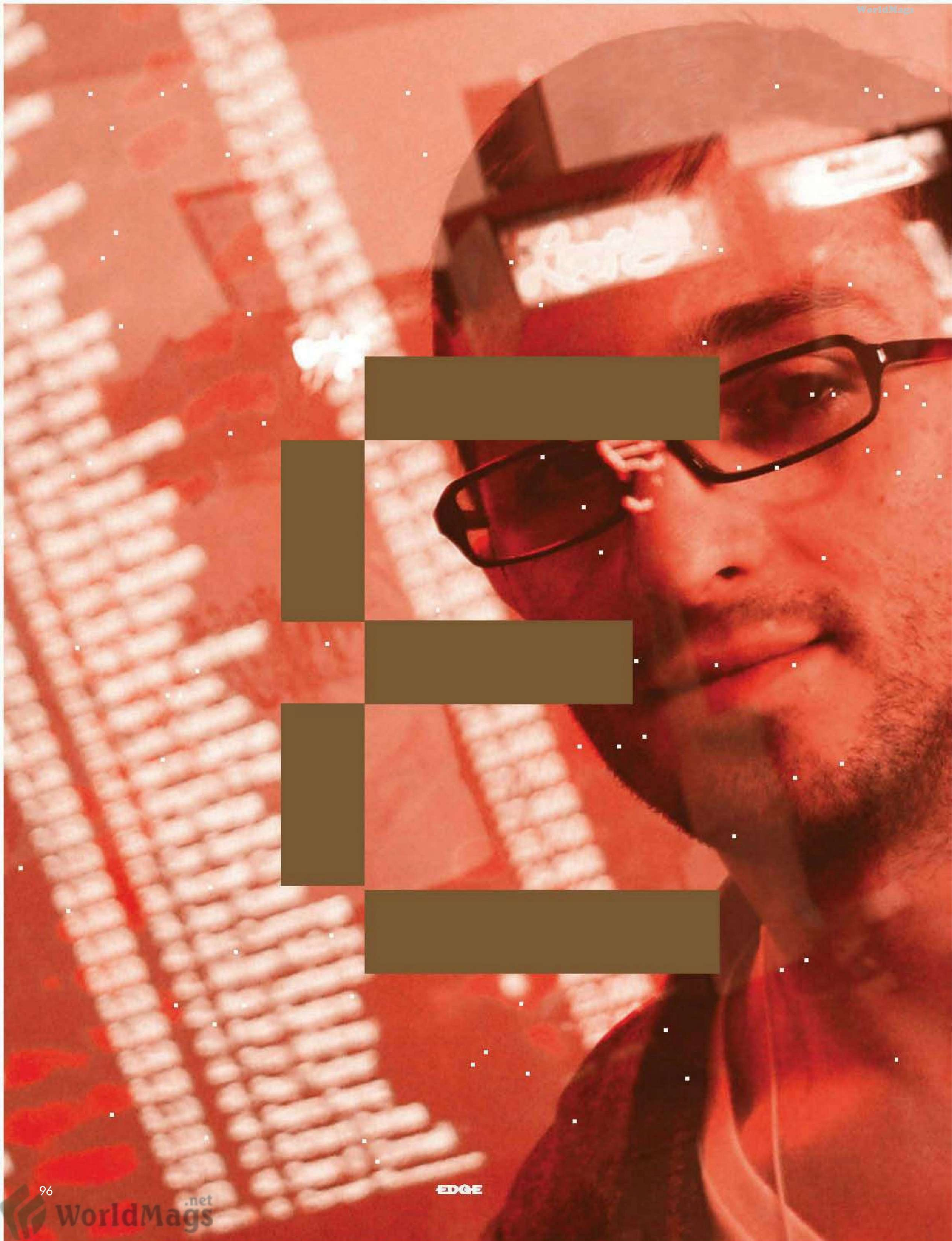
Gary Vincent (above) began his 30-year tenure at Funspot as temporary summer help, but signed on full-time the very next year. Since then, he's helped to collect and maintain the 300 coin-op cabinets that make up the American Classic Arcade Museum

One of the early arrivals to the tournament is 40-year-old **Robert Macauley**. The softly-spoken Australian has flown over 9,000 miles to compete in this year's competition. "There's not a lot of places like this where I'm from," he says. This is Macauley's fourth trip to the tournament, but only his second time competing. When asked if it was worth it to him to fly this far, he doesn't hesitate to respond: "Absolutely. This is the Super Bowl of classic gaming. There's nothing else like it."

Now in its 13th year, the tournament has become a revered destination among circles of classic gamers. Often referred to as the Mecca of gaming, the museum was born out of Vincent's love of the arcades that shaped his childhood. With barely disguised reverence, Vincent says: "The goal is to recreate that feel of the old '80s arcade. If somebody comes to the tournament and has a good time, if they feel 16 years old again – even for a day, even if they have a wife, kids, two full-time jobs – then we've accomplished our goal."

Four days later, the tournament is in full swing. Funspot's parking lot is packed with cars, some sporting out-of-state licence plates that reference *Pac-Man* or *Centipede*. Inside, a section of the arcade is cordoned off with yellow chains, behind which are assembled the 15 chosen titles. Droves of gamers mingle near the cabinets, some closely watching over the shoulders of their opponents, others talking shop about the best way to max out their scores on *Satan's Hollow*.

"IF THE PLAYERS FEEL 16 YEARS OLD AGAIN – EVEN FOR A DAY – THEN WE'VE ACCOMPLISHED OUR GOAL"



Twenty-five-year-old Dan Garofalo (left) drove from Somerville, NJ to compete against other classic gamers. Younger than most of the other contestants, he developed an affection for classic arcade games at Richie Knucklez, a retro arcade close to his home town

EVERY ONCE IN a while, a competitor raises his or her hand, and an ACAM referee rushes over with an iPad to log the score. By way of a large LCD projector, the overall tournament rankings dominate the far wall of the arcade. In twos and threes, contestants study the screen, ribbing each other for falling in rank, or congratulating others on advancing. This system is a recent addition to the tournament, says Vincent. "Before this we were logging scores with paper and pencils. Someone would take the scores into the back room and key them in by hand in to an old Excel spreadsheet made by an employee ages ago."

Last year, the effective but inelegant score-keeping system was replaced by Aurcade, a realtime score-tracking system. "Shortly after our 2009 tournament here, **David Hurnley** approached me – he's come here for years, I've known him for a long time – and he said: 'I have an idea that will make this tournament a lot better for you,'" says Vincent.

Hurnley is on hand this year to help maintain the system. He describes the origin of his brainchild as a response to personal necessity: "It started out specifically as a way to maintain a list of arcades and their locations. There's so few arcades left in the country, real arcades, that I wanted to know where I could play them. There wasn't something intuitive like that on the Internet. I set out to fix that." Aurcade currently tracks over 13,000 games at 874 locations around the world. For many, the database has become the definitive resource for locating classic arcade games near them.

It was from Aurcade's framework that Hurnley developed a new method to track the tournament's scores. "The process they used before was dirt slow. You wouldn't see the standings until six hours later. By the time you saw them, they were out of date," says Hurnley. His solution was to layer a score-tracking system over Aurcade's game database, allowing competitors to view each other's progress on each machine, as well as their overall tournament ranking. Participants were no longer left wondering how they fared until the next day of the tournament, and Hurnley had successfully found a way to collect data from unconnected, decades-old machines.



Aside from holding more than 40 world records for videogames, Isaiah 'TriForce' Johnson (above) promotes pro gamers through his company, Empire Arcadia. The Brooklyn native was also the first person in the US to purchase a 3DS – directly from Reggie Fils-Aime

Its adoption of technology isn't the only way the tournament has changed over the years. At the relatively young age of 25, and sporting full-sleeve tattoos on both arms, **Dan Garofalo** seems like an unlikely participant in this year's tournament. While most of the other contestants are middle-aged men, often with children of their own, Garofalo stands out as a youthful contender among a field of old-guard veterans. He and several of his friends have travelled from New Jersey to compete. "It's a gentleman's competition," he says. "It's friendly, but at the same time you're doing this for bragging rights. We're kind of unofficially representing Richie Knucklez".

Richie Knucklez is another classic arcade in Flemington, NJ. Garofalo started going there five years ago, drawn to the older arcade games because of their difficulty: "They're not like today's console games. They don't hold your hand, there's no tutorial. They're hard. You have to be at least half decent to compete here." For Garofalo, the steep, often brutal learning curve of the older arcade titles offers a challenging alternative to today's newbie-friendly games. "There's no easy setting for *Amidar*," he points out.

Historically, not all of the tournament's attendees have seen classic games as platforms for friendly competition. The King Of Kong, the 2007 documentary centered on the world record for *Donkey Kong*, depicts a battlefield upon which Steve Wiebe, Billy Mitchell and other classic-gaming heavyweights fight a war for personal recognition. Classic gamers are portrayed as larger-than-life heroes, villains and conspirators, their squabbles backlit by flickering game monitors.

"THEY AREN'T LIKE TODAY'S CONSOLE GAMES. THEY DON'T HOLD YOUR HAND, THERE'S NO TUTORIAL"


CAPCOM
BOWLING
GOLF

While Hank Chien (left) makes his living as a plastic surgeon, his passion is *Donkey Kong*. Chien took the world record from The King Of Kong star Steve Wiebe in January of this year, with a score of 1,068,000

HILE THE FILM generated media exposure for the classic gaming scene and the tournament, it exposed the hardcore, unfriendly side of professional gaming. One participant in the tournament, **Isaiah 'Triforce' Johnson**, dually subscribes to this mentality: "I don't have any particular genres I specialise in. I play classic, I play modern. I have records in both." As of this writing, Johnson holds the world records for *Super Mario Bros*, *Mercs*, *Black Tiger*, *Street Fighter II* and *Tiger Road*.

Johnson describes his life as a professional gamer as a wild blur of intense competition and travel. In the three weeks before the tournament, he went to Chicago to promote the Council of Gaming Legends, New Jersey to defend his *Street Fighter II* title, and San Francisco to test the new *Ocarina Of Time* on Nintendo 3DS. "Keep in mind, this is all on the weekends," says Johnson. "Monday through Thursday I have a nine-to -five job. There isn't a day I'm not working." The tournament, he says, is just another opportunity to set new gaming records, or defend his current titles.

While Johnson and his ever-present NES Power Glove fashion accessory represent the flamboyant fringe of gamers at this year's tournament, **Hank Chien** serves as his down-to-earth antithesis. The 33-year-old plastic surgeon and gamer is one of the most grounded competitors in attendance. "In the beginning, I didn't like people watching me," he admits. "I would get nervous. But it's become unavoidable. People want to see me play, so I've gotten used to it." Chien recently attained Internet fame after capturing the *Donkey Kong* world record from both Mitchell and Wiebe. He too will soon have a documentary about his world record, Doctor Kong, slated to be released later in 2011.

While he proudly carries his title as world champion of *Donkey Kong*, Chien doesn't see the tournament so much as a forum for competition as much as he does a warm social gathering. "I see people here that I haven't seen in a year, and I've become good friends with them. It's like a reunion, almost." Chien cites his friendship with Ben Falls, another classic gamer, as an example: "At first, we just talked about *Donkey Kong*. After a few weeks, though, we became friends. We hang out, we help each other – there's a bond there, and it started with games."



Tom Votava (above) has been attending the tournament for the past six years. The 33-year-old programmer from Arizona faced stiff competition this year but eventually eked out a victory of five points over John McAllister

As the final day of the tournament winds down, the rankings reveal a struggle for first place between Tom Votava and John McAllister. Competitors crowd around the score screen as Vincent issue a call for the last five minutes of the tournament. At five o'clock, the remaining contestants step away from the machines as referees input their scores.

At a competitive event such as this, you expect winners and finalists to possess over-the-top personalities in line with 'Triforce' Johnson and Billy Mitchell. This year's champion doesn't remotely fit that profile. **Tom Votava**, a 33-year-old programmer from Arizona, is well-mannered, with an unimposing demeanor. When asked if he's pleased with his victory, Votava says he is, but that "quite honestly I don't even come up here just for the tournament. It's more because I know my friends are going to be in one place at one time." Echoing Chien's take on the event, Votava sees the tournament as an opportunity to socialise with people that share similar interests. All of the competitors, he tells us, share a bond through their love of classic gaming.

Discerning the tournament's role in the increasingly fractured amalgam that is gaming culture is difficult. Through a cynical lens, Vincent's arcade cabinets are laughably primitive compared to modern games' online leaderboards and integrated voice communication. Why bother wasting the time and fuel to travel to rural New Hampshire to play against friends when you can just message someone on your Xbox Live friends list?

From another angle, the persistence of a competitive arcade scene turns the mirror back on modern gaming. Watching skilled gamers square off in person over nothing more than two buttons and a joystick makes listening to racial slurs being screamed by a 12-year-old over voice chat seem petty and absurd. Besting a faceless gamertag with a 31-hit combo will never measure up to inputting your initials over your rival's on a high-score screen.

If nothing else, this antiquated gathering acts as a direct conduit to that raw sense of competition and one-upmanship that defined arcades in their prime, and serves as a reminder of how impersonal and even clinical multiplayer gaming has become. ■

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit 360, PC, PS3
If Michael Bay had been tasked with remaking *Mario Kart*, we're guessing the result would've looked like *Hot Pursuit*. Instead of kid-friendly spinning shells and bananas, however, your arsenal includes deployable spike strips, EMP blasts, road blocks and helicopter support (the latter example even lifts overhead and towards the lead car just like *Mario Kart*'s winged blue shell, if not as sure-fire deadly). Sadly, the Autolog feature's deft promotion of leaderboard rivalries merely serves to remind you that you're playing outside the launch window and your friends have put *Hot Pursuit* in their rearview mirror. New Autolog recommendation: lure them back.

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 360, PS3
Epic not just in scale – especially when you're clambering along the limbs of a gigantic stone titan – but also in length, the sumptuous looking *Lords Of Shadow* is a rarity among the six-to-eight hour experiences of today. It could certainly do with some trimming in between the set-pieces, but few could argue that Gabriel Belmont's tour of a magic-infused medieval Europe isn't a journey fit for a hero.

LA Noire 360, PS3
Before *LA Noire* arrived and changed the face of… well, faces, the notion of discussing an actor's performance in a game revolved solely around voice. No longer. Regardless of the game's persistent niggles – ropey combat, inane pedestrian chatter, an interrogation system that tries to get away with stamping a subjective 'doubt' response (correct/incorrect) and so on – *LA Noire*'s legacy is cemented by the now-apparent wrinkled brows and pursed lips of its uniformly brilliant cast.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

This time around, the joke's squarely on Duke

There isn't a tired pop culture reference that *Duke Nukem Forever* misses. Christian Bale's 2009 off-camera tirade makes the cut, as do references to dining in hell, cake and even Leeroy Jenkins. It feels like you're playing a videogame written by the creative team behind the Scary Movie franchise, so convinced is *Forever* that all it needs to do is spark a moment of cultural recognition to earn a quick, cheap laugh.

It's the videogame parodies that come off as the most misguided, however. "Power armour is for pussies," Duke Nukem declares, rejecting Master Chief's distinctive green casing early on – although he doesn't reject a two-weapon limit and recharging health. "I hate valve puzzles," he groans later. And who can blame him, when his are so bland?



This is what kills so much of Nukem's humour – he's attempting to be subversive in a deeply conservative game. And, luckily for him, he's not the only one.

Shadows Of The Damned (p106) offers up the same conflict between outrageous hero and ordinary mechanics. Which is surprising because co-creator Suda 51 once dared to make a game's design part of the joke. *No More Heroes'* empty open world and the undisguised grinding the player was asked to do to progress (starting repetitive minigames from the Job Centre, no less) might have put off many players, but as an exaggeration of common genre failings it was an effective piece of parody.

Bulletstorm may not have mocked the competition, but its OTT combat loop provided a genuine alternative to the po-faced shooters of today. Nukem, meanwhile, would have you believe he's the satiric, subversive response to current FPS trends. In truth, his game has no answer to them.

Duke Nukem Forever

Publisher 2K Games
Developer 3D Realms, Triptych Games, Gearbox Software, Piranha Games
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

There's never been another game quite like *Duke Nukem Forever*. That's not because it's inventive, technologically dazzling or particularly memorable, but because there literally hasn't been another major production that's taken 14 years to complete.

And that 14 years, remember, is the same period of time that has seen the firstperson shooter emerge from relative infancy to become videogames' central preoccupation. Here, by way of hasty fudge, outright theft and obvious retrofit, you get to see an entire genre growing up. It's not pretty, but it's still fascinating to witness, and it makes *Duke Nukem Forever* an awkward botch of a game worth playing exactly once. Approach it as an archaeologist and there's fun to be had sifting through compacted layers of design strata and increasingly elderly internet memes, in search of that single moment when everything started to go wrong.

And what strata they are. QTEs, rechargeable health, limited weapon slots and destructible cover: all are elements from other games that clearly caught 3D Realms' roving eyes as the team slogged onwards, moving from confidence towards desperation and, with the advent of each new hardware generation, running a little faster just to keep up. Some of these borrowed mechanics are perfectly adequate – carrying only two guns at any time provides the flavourless arsenal with a little strategic spice – while others, such as shreddable cover, are so limited and inconsistent in their application that they represent little more than an occasional annoyance. Each addition clearly comes at a price, however – one that's paid in terms of basic implementation and focus.

And it's focus, as much as the dated shooting and endless corridors, that really lets *Forever* down. Forget the cribs from *Halo*: 3D Realms' most debilitating influence is undoubtedly *Half-Life* – and in particular its sense of immersion in a world that's waiting to respond in reasonably convincing ways. That famous tram ride has mutated, in the hands of Duke's designers, into a muddle of working toilets, water coolers and telephones. Interactive in-game furniture is a fixation from which the game never quite recovers, and it's here that you begin to see why such a stoically unremarkable game took over a decade to build.

The seeds of disaster are scattered across environments that come littered with expensive distractions: whiteboards to draw on, basketballs to dunk and mirrors that reflect not just Nukem, but his engagingly moronic jumping animation. Granted, these extra-curricular elements feed into the game's Ego system (a health bar expanded by futzing with pinball machines and winning at slots), but was it really worth sacrificing so many other things in order to include them? It's not rare to spend ten strategy-free minutes pumping a largely immobile boss full of rockets only to find out that, just around the corner, you can switch on a shower and use a photocopier to scan your backside. While some of these trinkets were foreshadowed in previous games, the sheer abundance of them here suggests that you're playing the primer for a wayward subgenre that mercifully never actually turned up. Nukem's caretakers have crafted a shooter with a functional en-suite where its set-pieces should be.

It's a game that lets you throw a paper plane from the Hoover Dam, but then struggles to apply depth-of-field effects

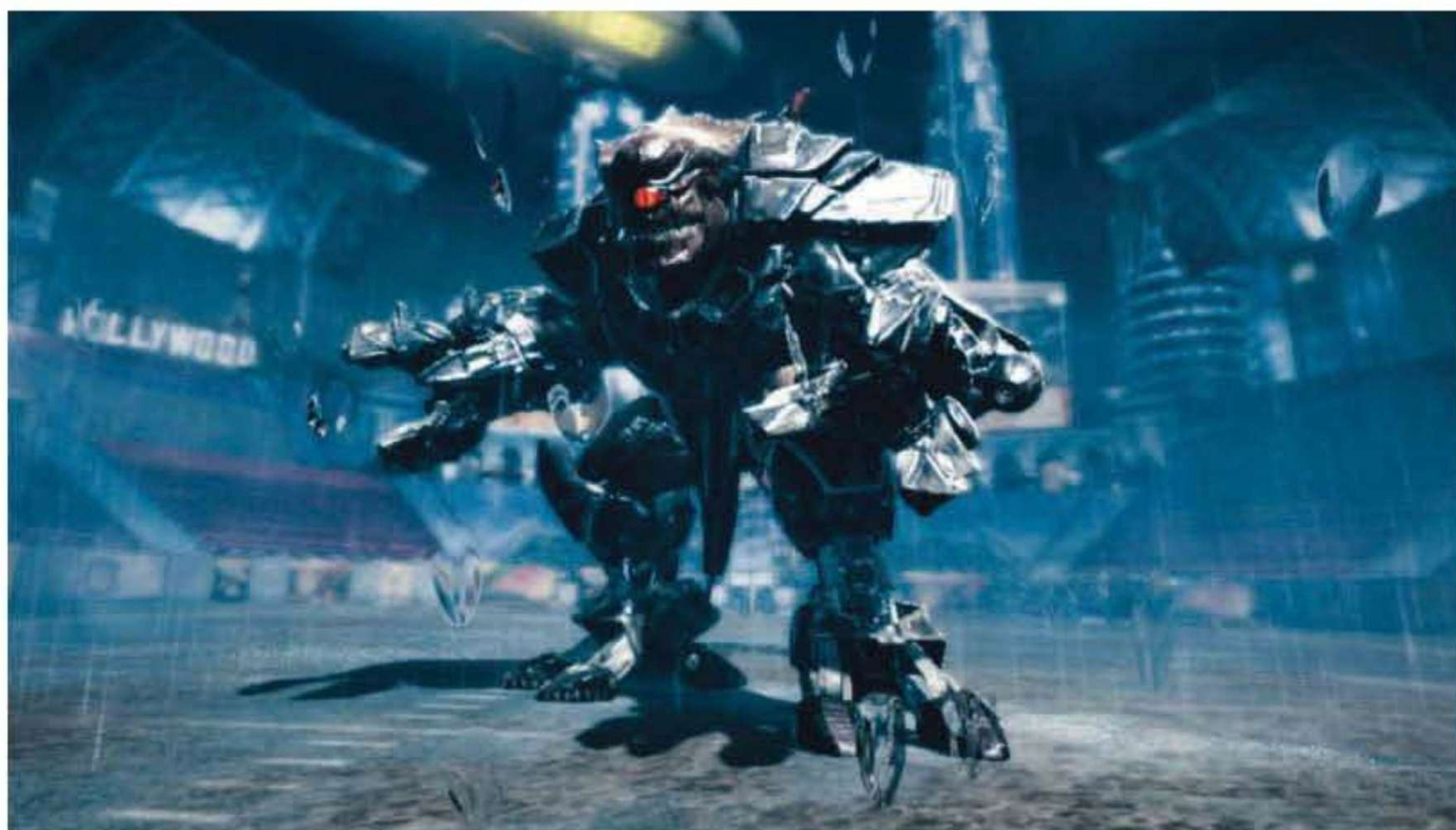


These interactive asides are the primary symptom of a product built with bizarre priorities; a game that lets you throw a paper plane from the top of the Hoover Dam but then struggles to apply depth-of-field effects competently enough – on 360, at least – to allow you to see who you're actually shooting at half the time. Somewhere along the journey, 3D Realms' greedy feature creep mutated into a fundamental lack of confidence: despite all the swearing and fellatio, the Duke Nukem we've ended up with isn't the class rebel so much as the kid at school who was always looking out of the window, and given detention again and again.

This, ultimately, is the biggest tragedy: *Duke Nukem Forever*'s epic development period has turned out a game that isn't, now, particularly ambitious. It isn't even that competent. Compared to the current crowd of artfully mindless blasters, *Forever* fails to measure up. The game's environments lack scale, visual pleasures or internal logic, and the weapons are either rote and unexciting, like the pistol and railgun, or irritating novelties, such as shrink- and freeze-rays – both of which have been imported, without tweaking, from 1996. Set-pieces, meanwhile, also seem to be culled from a list of things that probably sounded good on paper over a decade ago. Expect a conceptually cute race around a casino in an RC speedster, and a haphazard physics puzzle including a wrecking ball and a building site. When a level does actually flicker briefly into life, the results are swiftly undermined by the inability of the creaking engine to keep up with the action. "There's too many of them!" yells a chopper pilot at one point, during an on-rails air assault through the dusty wilds of Nevada. Actually, there's three of them, but it's still enough to see the framerate retreating to the low teens.

The myriad technical shortcomings – particularly prevalent on the console ports – only get worse the further you progress into the campaign. After a semi-scrubbed-up opening hour – it's vacuous and poorly paced, but compared to the rest of the game, this early degree of visual polish feels a little like fraud – you're dropped into a muddle of flickering Vegas skylines and desert vistas covered in the kind of naff texturing you'd otherwise never get to see any more, at least not now that EA's finally closed Pandemic. Dropships tend to bring forth enemies in polite clusters of twos and threes so that the game doesn't crash entirely when they get

ABOVE Weapons like the shotgun and the Devastator can be relied upon to send hot metal speeding through the air, but it's odd that the developer didn't spend any time adding new weaponry. Too busy making sure the taps in all the bathrooms worked, presumably.
LEFT The opening preamble goes out of its way to remind players how long *Duke Nukem Forever*'s been in development: not the smartest of moves when the rest of the game is so lacklustre and dated



BELOW Pigcops make for one-shot kills, but they're hardly the most challenging enemies. Execution moves at least add a little strategy to proceedings, though, since they give you a full health boost



Boss fights offer an admirable sense of scale, but then undermine it by wedging you into a tiny playing area. Forget any kind of intricacy, too: most headline baddies are straight-up bullet sponges followed by QTEs



their boots on the ground, and if you die during any of the ensuing action – in the middle of one of the game's many unlovable firstperson platforming interludes, say – you can prepare yourself for loads so mysteriously lengthy that they become a striking form of meta-commentary on the primal magic of just waiting for things. Faced with this kind of material, Gearbox, the studio that leapt in to finish the project when all seemed lost, should at least be complimented for such sympathetic treatment of the project it inherited. The game's buggy tech seems largely untweaked and unrefined by its final custodians, while the missions and characters lack the crafty white-trash satire that made *Borderlands* so enjoyable.

There's certainly nothing crafty about Nukem, however fond you might be of his womanising and 'roid-rage. He's a flat-top cheeseburger of a hero, left to shoot at pigs in a game so slow to pick up on a joke that it doesn't realise you can't actually caricature a town that's already as radiantly implausible as Las Vegas. After that, all you're left with are elements that were old even in the '90s: turret sections riffing on Independence Day, a Bat Cave stand-in called – really? – the Duke Cave, and that hulking cipher at the centre of it all who parodies the likes of Stallone, Roddy Piper and Chuck Norris. It's a game out of time, in other words, left to revolve around a toothless spoofing of has-beens, and even its much-touted misogyny comes off as half-hearted. After the mandatory jaunt through a strip club turns out to be significantly less convincing than a wander around Disneyland's Hall of Presidents, it's ultimately left to Capture the Babe, a CTF variant in the unnecessary online suite, to provide any kind of genuine offence. It does so elegantly, however, via its



DIMINISHING RETURNS

Duke Nukem's shrinkage sections – levels that see you reduced to the size of an action figure in order to battle rats and sneak around inside skirting boards – would make for passable palate-cleansers if they didn't also coincide with prolonged bouts of infuriating platforming. Nukem's fluctuating sense of weight and unpredictable jump quickly form an unholy alliance with instant-death drops that no amount of bouncing around on waffle irons can easily make up for. It's also worth questioning whether a game filled with such low-resolution art assets should feature set-pieces in which a single tin of beans will tower over you like a PS1 skyscraper.

Duke Nukem Forever **has a terrible case of turret syndrome – a malady that dates the game almost as much as the character models and environments. At least once the adventure hits the open road, there's a little more variety**

breezy thematic blend of abduction and domestic violence. Astonishingly, it's worse than it sounds, and the rest of the multiplayer isn't much better, with primitive king of the hill and deathmatch modes strung across a range of claustrophobic jump-pad-heavy environments. New additions like an XP system and character progression rub up against an antique match browser rife with disconnections and lag. The whole thing reeks of afterthought and, left out of the Achievements, it's arguable it should have been left off the disc too.

And so Nukem limps into the sunset, the game's eventual release a quiet triumph for the design alumni, perhaps, but a far more qualified success for anyone on our side of the cash register. This is a project that consumed a considerable chunk of its creative team's lives, and while everyone who encounters it will be engrossed in the eternal mystery of where all that effort actually went, there's not even much pleasure to be found in its failures. A kind of disappointed embarrassment is the eventual reward for completing *Duke Nukem Forever*, then.

But what's the gain? That, ultimately, depends on where you stand. For 3D Realms and its beleaguered staff, there's hopefully a little closure waiting at the end of the credits. Gearbox, meanwhile, has cannily landed a cut-price hit and a potentially lucrative licence. As for the rest of us? We at least have a chance to marvel at the hectic cost of ambition, and to be mystified, once more, at the strange, stupid, painful things that some of us will do for love.

3

Post Script

Could Nukem have worked better as a trailer-trash Master Chief?

Forget about the bravado: *Duke Nukem Forever* struggles early, and struggles often. It struggles on a variety of fronts, in fact: with shooting, movement, pacing, framerate and even basic puzzles. Most of all, though, it struggles indoors, as it sends players through a mystifying riddle of narrow corridors and claustrophobic chambers, all tending to look a little too similar, and most only defined by the spots where the designers have placed the endless blocks of rubble necessary to stop you from, you know, actually *trying to explore*.

While an early scramble up the busted facade of the Duke Burger skyscraper and a quick blitz through the streets of Sin City suggest that the game might have been more successful if it ventured outside a little bit more, both sequences are filled with their own fair shares of botched encounters, and neither contains any real sense of scale or dramatic tension. It's only much later in the game when you hit the open road in Nukem's monster truck – he was hardly likely to drive a Prius, was he? – that the whole experience briefly blossoms into something much more enjoyable.

Here, under bright blue skies and surrounded by miles of rich, red rock, wedged in between a woeful Vegas act and an equally dismal final tour of the Hoover Dam's innards – spoiler: it looks a lot like the stuff you saw in Vegas – the game has the rare chance to embrace the kind of scope a *Duke Nukem* title needs in order to be successful in the 21st century. It's a far more linear riff on the Silent Cartographer, with that monster truck standing in for a Warthog. Suddenly, hanging out with Nukem's not that bad.

For one thing, there's at least a little variety to be had as you blast through desert canyons and leap echoing Evel Knievel gorges, spurred on by the brilliantly rattly sound of the V12 and a decent nitro boost for the really big jumps. Drifting on to stretches of shattered highway brings alien checkpoints to ram your way through, and the game even ups the headcount, sometimes offering you as many as ten or 12 foes to face off against in a single encounter – most of them end up splattered on the windscreen, too.

And even when the designers bring in some ropey scripting to get you out of your motor for a while – who knew monster trucks used that much fuel? Perhaps Nukem should have had a look at that Prius, after all – they suddenly find their shooting groove, creating a range of tight, well-controlled firefights with room for the player to actually do a little strategising in the heat of battle.

Why does this work so well? Partly it's a question of geography. Outside of the corridors and air ducts of Vegas, 3D Realms has no choice but to create little arenas: muddles of cover at various heights in which things like placement, weapon management and line of sight actually have some impact on the outcome of the conflict. They're Crytek action bubbles of a sort, and although they're the kind of level design almost every other contemporary shooting game can handle with ease, in *Duke Nukem Forever* they feel like a revelation. One genuinely enjoyable example sees you clearing out enemy turrets and fighting back dropships as you sweep across a river and up into an old and abandoned mine (granted, it's in order for you to then slog through a truly limp puzzle section), while the very best of the bunch has you dropped into a surprisingly detailed model of a wild west main street, complete with barns to clear out, a saloon bar to pose behind, and balconies that do a decent job of disintegrating under heavy gunfire.

It's when you hit the open road in Nukem's monster truck that the whole experience briefly blossoms



In the main, though, this stuff works because in *Duke Nukem Forever* the kind of mechanics that often go with cover shooters – a health recharge, bullet-sponge enemies, only two weapon slots – have been grafted on to a game where the arsenal and level design doesn't really support them. Throw a few pigcops and shotgun rounds into the old west town, in other words, and guns, enemies and environments start to sync. Furthermore, you get a convincing change of pace in a game that otherwise tends to alter its rhythm only through unsuccessful gimmicks and sluggish boss battles. Finally, you're where you should be in a run-and-gun game: in the middle of an environment that forces you to keep moving and to keep your eyes peeled. This close-up world of sudden turns, dead ends and limited visibility is perfect for double-barrelled blasts of buckshot.

For a game that's filled with a decade's worth of terrible pop-culture references (*Duke Nukem Forever* contains idiotic riffs on everything from Christian Bale's temper to Justin Timberlake hits and the movie Team America: World Police – it's truly the local radio DJ of the FPS genre), the inclusion of an old-school western shootout also feels like a genuine nod to the past, and it makes for a chunk of action so authentically exciting that it's a shame to have to climb back into the truck at the end of it all and head back into the maze of air vents and monster closets. If Nukem's really larger than life, why keep him caged up all the time?

Perhaps all 3D Realms really had to do to save *Duke Nukem Forever*, then, was to heed a classic piece of parental advice. The game wasn't crying out for more strippers, more shrink rays, or more triple-breasted bosses. What it actually needed was for its developers to go outside and get some sun. ■

Shadows Of The Damned

A patchwork, not a hybrid, *Shadows Of The Damned* is an awkward mixture of elements from the oeuvres of its high-profile creators. As executive director and writer, Suda 51 brings along many of the motifs that have typified his quirky, outlandish productions. From wisecracking protagonist Garcia Hotspur to blood-spurting finishers and a fetish for strawberries, it's easy to mistake *Shadows Of The Damned* for his latest solo effort rather than his first major collaboration. Creative producer Shinji Mikami's influence is less overt, evident most obviously in a control scheme, camera and weapon upgrade system carried over from *Resident Evil 4*.

The threadbare plot – Hotspur's girlfriend is dragged to hell by the Lord Of Demons, and he goes after her – sets up the action. Divided into bite-sized acts, the game thunders along at a cracking pace but the monotony of repetition sets in fast. Regardless of the frequency and variety of boss battles, and minor distractions like 2D side-scrolling sections, the gameplay is too basic and the tasks too simple to motivate you to plumb hell's depths for seven hours.

There are two firing modes: light shots for enemies veiled by shadow to stun them into vulnerability, and standard shots for everything else. Darkened areas need illuminating, either by shooting wall-mounted goat heads (we did mention Suda 51's involvement, right?) or activating giant fireworks, before you can comfortably take care of the walking damned. The work of Suda and Mikami has never demanded competitive AI, but the nature of the game's demonic foes calls for something more advanced and, sadly, it doesn't deliver. The creatures roaming this underworld are athletic and aggressive, but their pathfinding and attacks are haphazard and embarrassing. It's a problem made worse by the fact that precision headshots are a worthwhile pursuit – granting you a quick exit when you most need it – but near-impossible as foes stumble, lurch and spin around on the spot. A lock-on or some auto-aim would be a huge help, especially against some of the super-sized villains of the deep, but it's just one of the design team's oversights. Boss battles are often epic in scale but rarely call for anything other than point-and-shoot target skills. Keeping such set-pieces simple is, however, a commendable design decision that suits the restrictive over-the-shoulder camera.

Your arsenal is eccentric but limited. The skull-themed stand-ins for pistol, shotgun and machine-gun are modified as the game progresses, introducing explosive upgrades that take too much effort to conveniently utilise. Charging up your Skullcussioner, for example, to fire off a grenade-style skull-bomb, takes too long and its targeting is too imprecise to be effective. As you upgrade certain guns, such as the

Publisher EA
Developer Grasshopper Manufacture
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

bit.ly/lLj0xw
Suda 51 interview

A gung-ho marine? Sure! A turret section in which your weapon calls a sex line to enlarge itself? Go for it!



machine-gun-style Teether, they're transformed from believable to ridiculous. There's a novelty value to their over-the-top looks, but they can severely obstruct your view when backed into a corner.

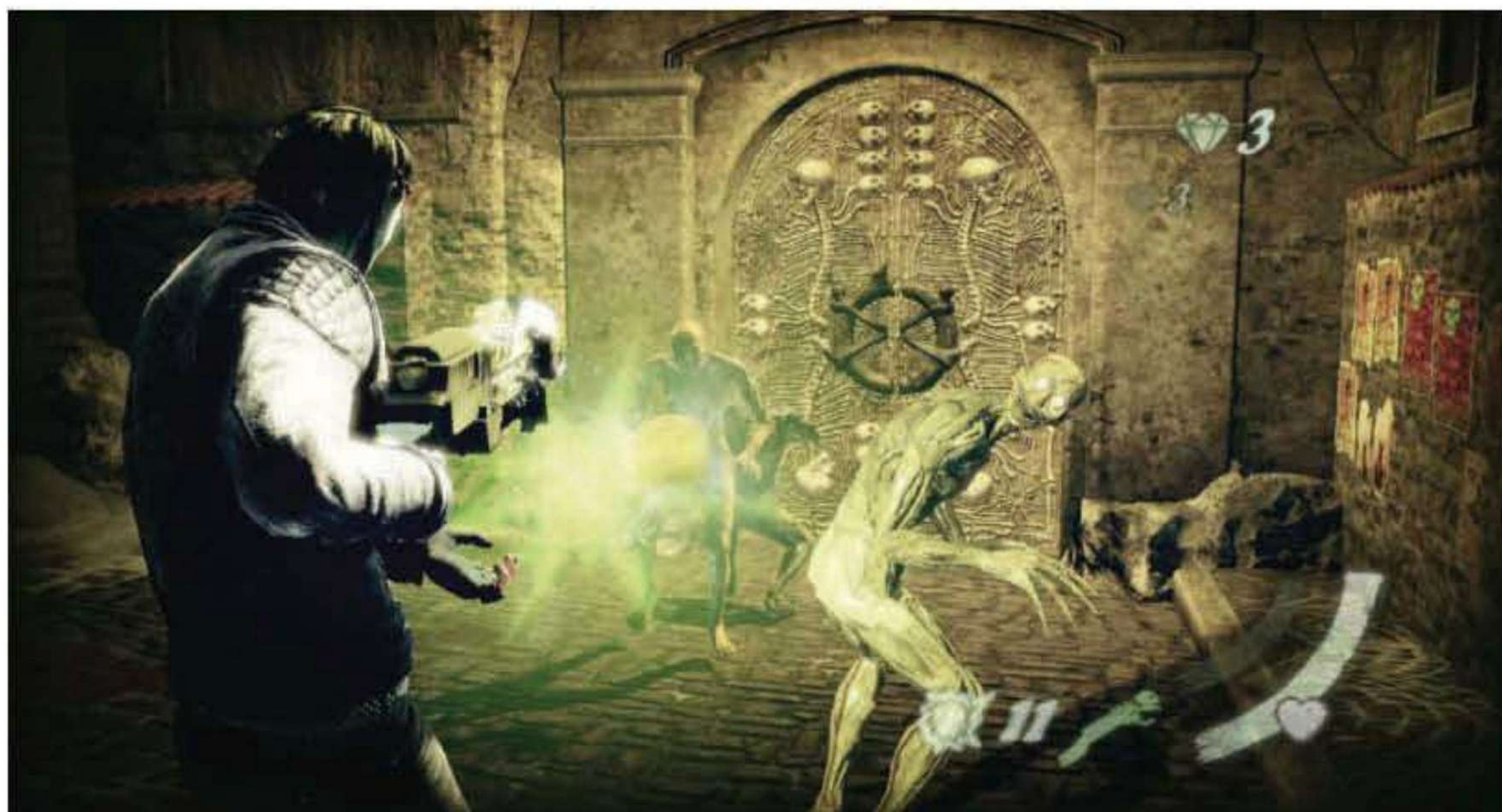
If the weapons suffer for their grand designs, the environments suffer for their consistent banality. Though Hotspur's journey takes him from towns and forests to catacombs, none of the locales are memorable. Each is drenched in the same red and yellow hue, giving hell the look of an episode of CSI (complete with limbs strewn all over the place). Only one environment truly stands out: the neon streets of the red light district. It's just a shame this section of the game is so off-putting in its sexualisation and juvenility.

SOTD is mired by innuendo and crude humour throughout. The game's damsel in distress, Paula, is an underwear-clad object regularly ogled by the camera and demeaned by the script. Sexism may be a familiar aspect of Suda's work, but in *No More Heroes*, for example, there are strong helpings of charm and personality – along with some existential commentary – to take the edge off. Scaling the giant, naked upper torso of Paula to reach an exit is a preposterous scene, neither funny nor meaningful. It also summons one of the game's biggest demons: none of it has any point. It feels slapdash rather than premeditated, as if the creative minds behind it were unchained beyond reason, allowed to throw in idea after idea without regard for the resultant experience. A gung-ho marine with 30 seconds of screen time? Sure! A turret section in which your weapon calls a sex line to enlarge itself? Go for it!

Underpinning the game's idea gauntlet, however, is a solid set of mechanics that should have been capitalised on and refined further. At its best the action can feel like a trigger-happy *Resident Evil 4*, and the fluid death animations appear to have been lifted wholesale from those of *Killer 7*'s Heaven Smiles. Headshots lead to a dynamic, *Stranglehold*-style bullet-cam, and some of the creature design is frightfully effective. With such potential, it's a shock to find no incentive for return play. There's no option to return to your favourite moments upon completion, and the lack of a high-score mode is a missed opportunity.

When two industry heavyweights put their heads together, the hope is that they'll deliver something that plays to the strengths of both individuals' expertise. *Shadows Of The Damned* actually does the opposite, accentuating Suda's often over-indulgent scriptwriting and accelerating Mikami's brand of horror into a hyper-gothic, shock-free world of bright lights. With a little more restraint and focus on the core experience, *Shadows Of The Damned* could have been the action thrill ride Garcia Hotspur thinks it is. Instead the game – like Hotspur himself – is all talk.

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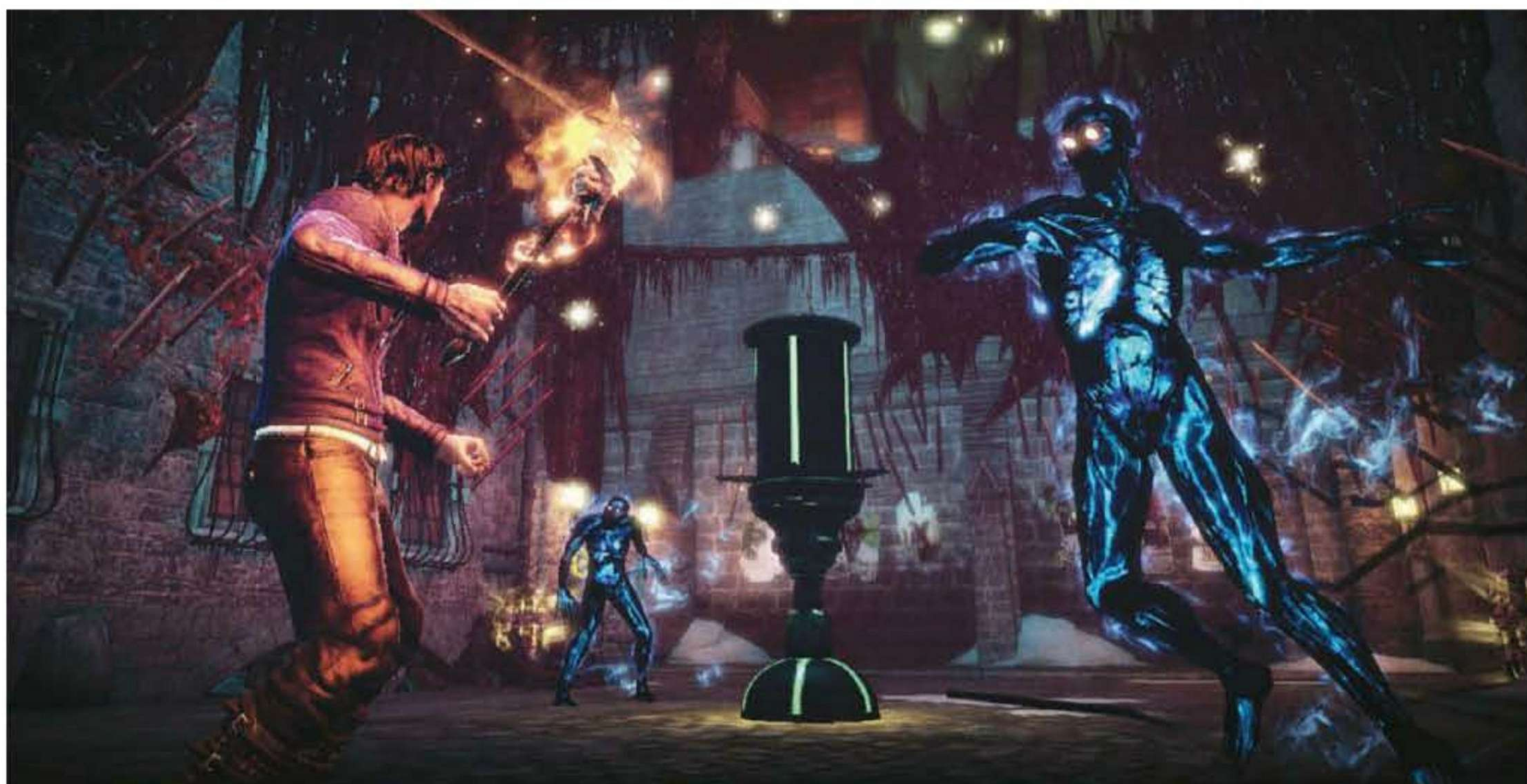


LEFT Demons are much easier to fry in the light. The Skullcussioner, effectively a shotgun, can wipe out whole waves of enemies with one pull of the trigger. **BELOW** The Teether takes on the role of a machine-gun, rattling off a barrage of projectiles. Though you're often outnumbered, there's plenty of ammo left lying around hell to replenish stores, as well as alcohol to top up your health



ABOVE It's interesting to find *Shadows Of The Damned*'s art direction taking cues from western visions of hell. From scythe-wielding reapers to horse-mounted hell-mongers, the game is steeped in western iconography





With Suda 51 taking on core writing duties, the narrative is the expected unconventional mix of movie references (including a brief log-cabin homage to Evil Dead II) and madcap characters



Shadows Of The Damned, with its subversive style and oddball humour, poses the question of how you counter-balance the energy and ideas of a 'punk rock' game designer like Suda 51

Post Script

What happens when the master of madness meets the master of suspense?

On paper, *Shadows Of The Damned* is a collaboration; in practice it's a very Suda affair – and nowhere is that more apparent than in the case of its star. Neither Suda nor Shinji Mikami is averse to some stereotyping – consider Garcia Hotspur the lovechild of *Resident Evil 4*'s Luis Sera and *Killer 7*'s Coyote Smith and you're some way to understanding him. But much of the reason for Hotspur's clichéd ways is the script's reliance on the filmic tropes of Robert Rodriguez. From Dusk Til Dawn and the El Mariachi trilogy are major influences on *Shadows Of The Damned*, and from the phallic symbolism of firearms to girlfriend Paula's transformation from beauty to bloodthirsty beast, the game plays out more like homage than original creation. This is to be expected from the pen of the Mexican-American pop-culture-obsessed Suda 51, of course, but it's strange to find the ghost of Mikami slip in and out of the game's roaring rampage of revenge rather than playing an integral role.

Hotspur himself can be seen to represent an imbalance of power in the game's design and development, and the overall power of the writer in determining the mood and substance of a videogame. With writing duties under Suda's command, no gameplay design can work around his avant-garde ideas without being painted by his wild, unpredictable brush strokes. The undermining of authority, the destructive lust for women and the symbiotic relationship between sex and death – Hotspur embodies everything common to Suda's body of work. All of this is in direct contrast to the themes of Mikami's canon, in which organised, military might – be it STARS or the United States government – holds the key to surviving horror. The brief appearance of peripheral character Mr X in *Shadows Of The Damned* reinforces the sense of an auteur clash. Hotspur crosses paths momentarily with the Bio-Organic Weapon in the safety of a log cabin and discovers he's on the hunt for the demon which skinned one of his relatives (and is now wearing that skin around town, no less). Mr X is every bit the STARS member, from flak jacket and heavy weapon to man-on-a-mission ethos, and his fate – to end up in chunks – is arguably a symbolic death. Whether it symbolises the death of Mikami's game design input or serves as a knowing farewell to the suited-and-booted world of hardmen with biceps bigger than their brains is open to interpretation.

Elsewhere in the title, Mikami's influence is stronger, though still diluted by Suda's aggressive approach to character. The trading posts of *Shadows Of The Damned* are lifted from *Resident Evil 4* and perform the same pace-slowing, currency-redeeming function. The difference is that here they're operated by an eight-foot demon, Christopher, who's illuminated by the glow of vegetation and constantly grins with shark-like teeth. While Mikami's games have a human quality – even *Vanquish*'s Sam Gideon revealed his face from time to time – Suda's approach is all about the hyper-real, and the effect of this collision course between Mikami's function and Suda's form is also jarring in a practical sense. *RE4* was a game built around fear and tension, the blue torches used by its merchant not only heralding a chance to even the odds but a welcome moment of respite. In *Shadows'* OTT romp, however, such lulls are out of place. It's hard not to think that, had Suda been let off the leash entirely, *Shadows* might exhibit the kind of playful, experimental structure needed to back up its frantic and frivolous tone.

As it stands, *Shadows Of The Damned* may be definitive proof of the dangers of dividing duties among major, established creative forces. The moment Suda became the primary writer, the game became his, and give or take the odd mechanical compromise, Mikami was just along for the ride. ■

Dungeon Siege III

Developer Square Enix
Publisher Obsidian
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

To truly appreciate what Obsidian Entertainment brings to *Dungeon Siege III*, you need to speak to the automaton standing watch at the mechanical gates to the city of Stonebridge. His animation is limited, his character model is lacking in detail and, to tell the truth, the location he guards isn't a particularly rewarding place to explore. Yet, if you ask him to tell you a little about his home town, along with the usual fantasy shtick about goblins and men forging alliances, he'll also admit that Stonebridge is home to hundreds of feral house cats.

You could call it the Obsidian touch: the studio can't match Bethesda or BioWare – two developers it has stood in for in the last decade – at budget or spectacle, but it can surpass them both, and often with ease, when it comes to incidentals and charm. Let the big kids pile on the apocalyptic set-pieces and galaxy-spanning overworld maps – this team has the house-cat angle covered.

Dungeon Siege III is not an especially comedic game, but its landscapes and characters are enlivened by dozens of warm human touches. Busting open every barrel you come across is encouraged not just by the loot you could find inside, but because of the economic boost it apparently provides to the ailing barrel-making industry, while the ludicrous buyback schemes of the game's shops are explained away by the fact that local merchants fundamentally misunderstand the relationship between supply and demand. Elsewhere, the striking Cyclops miners you encounter towards the adventure's second half will not return to their toil unless they're provided with shorter working days and monocles for the elderly. This is a developer that's smart enough to poke fun at a roleplaying game's mechanics and traditions, but it's perhaps smarter still in that it then finds ways to incorporate most of them too.

And so, beyond the same old story about leading a rebellion and reuniting a nation, Obsidian has built a likeable and enormously tidy RPG. Party size is kept to a snug and co-op-friendly two, while team members level up automatically whenever you do, and can be swapped in and out during any lulls in combat.

The four classes are straightforward but smartly varied – alongside a standard warrior and a mage there's a ranged fighter and a middle-ground shapeshifter, who can switch between distanced attacks and close-up melee – and the game's upgrades are split neatly between abilities, proficiencies and talents, which translate to powers, modifiers and perks. It's a clear-headed system that turns a handful of basic attacks into a wealth of tweaking opportunities, and allows for a sizeable array of specific character builds. Granted, the abilities you'll unlock tend to be modest – you'll get the likes of ground pounds and fireballs, along with the opportunity to summon a hellish dog – but they all provide sly variations on either dealing damage or healing. The sense throughout is of a serene order always guiding your character progression, while the storyline itself advances in polite hops.

Busting open every barrel is encouraged because of the economic boost it provides to the barrel-making industry

As adventures go, *Dungeon Siege III* is constructed with a thrifty craftsmanship, only occasionally dropping into bouts of noble shabbiness. Moderately dazzling sights include the jellied halls of the Causeway fast-travel network, a decent run at imagining a city of cogs and escapements, and plenty of eerily pretty bogs riddled with fireflies and poisonous slugs. Clever use of particle effects and a dreamy colour palette make up for cutscene cameras that appear to have been placed by people more used to working on infomercials than fantasy epics, while the am-dram vocal performances will distract from the worrying realisation that there are clearly not quite enough faces to go around.

Energy – and budget – has ultimately been invested where it's important. The lore always opts for human motivations over arcane mysticism, while the AI teammates who will drop into your party whenever your co-op partner ups and leaves aren't as dismally stupid as you may have learned to fear. They'll heal you, race you to loot and change attacks with a convincing human swiftness; you can enter a fight knowing they're more likely to save your skin than get stuck on a door frame.

Not all of Obsidian's rough edges are delightful, however: the framerate is stuttery and unreliable, and a depth-of-field effect has been so overzealously applied that it can occasionally feel like you're watching an action movie filmed in a matchstick model, overseen by a director who brought all the wrong lenses along. The breadcrumb hints, meanwhile, are optional but dangerously compulsive, and can lead you past a lot of the more interesting detail.

Not all of its systems are perfect, either. This is that rare co-op RPG in which it's much more fun to be the sidekick, able to drop in and out of the ally role at will and explore all of the game's classes and builds, while the main protagonist is stuck with their first choice. Even stranger, given the series' dungeon crawling roots, is the fact that the loot is largely unexciting. You can spend a few minutes juggling the stats on a choice of boots, but Obsidian's workmanlike treasure never truly enchants.

It's a game built from pluck and resourcefulness, in other words: thoughtful when it can afford to be and stoically reliable – for the most part – when it can't. With handsome landscapes and a clutter of personable NPCs, *Dungeon Siege III* makes up for the absence of BioWare's gleaming polish or Bethesda's knotty intricacy with a little more soul, and perhaps a broader, more human, imagination.

7



BOO!
Obsidian's innate understanding of RPG systems has resulted in a handful of side missions that feel like shaggy dog stories rather than mechanical fetch quests; the very best of them, unfolding within the game's opening hours, sends you into a haunted house in order to free – or perhaps torture – the ghost of a young girl. *Dungeon Siege*'s medieval world may have suddenly turned noticeably Victorian, but it's still a nice piece of nuanced storytelling, and in terms of set-dressing within a strict budget, it's astonishing what the addition of a few spooky green lamps can do for you.



LEFT Lucas is your man when you're taking a lot of damage. Not only can the knight be specced as an excellent tank, he'll fight his way across a screen to save a downed colleague. He can rob the game of some of its challenge, however.
BELOW Area attacks may be basic in design, but they can get you out of a tough spot, and at least leave you with some pretty particle effects to look at. The same is true for most of the game's abilities, in fact: no-frills concepts implemented with a weighty charm



RIGHT Mages are useful during boss battles due to the range of brightly coloured tricks they have up their sleeves. They're a good companion class if you're playing as Lucas, and their arsenal has a lot more force than the guns and rifles





Post Script

Interview: Rich Taylor, Dungeon Siege III project director, Obsidian

Dungeon Siege III's companion AI is competent, consistent and often characterful – no small achievement given the complexities it faces in an RPG. We sit down with the project's director, **Rich Taylor** (right), to discover what went right.



Companion AI has a poor reputation in games. Did you spend much time examining common mistakes?
Companion AI is something we've had a lot of experience with here. There's been a companion in all but one of Obsidian's games, so we're aware of players' struggles associated with that kind of character. You want to create something that feels supportive rather than being an anchor, but you also don't want to create something that's going to go off and do its own thing. It's about finding the balance where you're working with a teammate rather than a robot.

Did your approach change much throughout the course of development?
Early on in the project it was all about making sure the AI didn't just play the game for the player. At the start, the AI actually did a lot more, and we've taken a lot of things back. It used to be very aggressive about picking up loot and gold for you, and by that point, the AI is running around and stealing all the fun. This is the first game we've made at Obsidian with Onyx, our own engine, so we've really been able to go in and really look at how we wanted things to behave. Before that, we've often inherited AI behaviours from previous titles.

It's easy to think of AI in isolation, but it must depend a lot on the game around it.
Absolutely. The AI came together as the overall approach to the game came together: the pacing, the focus of the story. A lot of that played into how we wanted the AI to behave. We knew, from the way we structure battles, that we didn't want the AI getting lost ever: it had to stay with you in case you were ambushed. We didn't want enemies to get the drop on you while the AI was off jogging into a wall. We also wanted to make sure the AI didn't head off and engage in fights that the player had already made the tactical decision to circumvent. It was the kind of game where we wanted the player to lead the way and make the decisions.

Does making an RPG add an additional layer of complexity? Suddenly, your AI is class-based, and has to understand so many potential abilities and upgrades.
We had a dedicated AI programmer, Steve Weatherly, from the beginning of the project right to the end, as we knew RPGs brought a lot of complexity with them. At the heart of it, we still have a priority system in place, and the AI is fundamentally prioritising what it needs to do most at any moment: there are just a lot more things for it to consider in this kind of game. So if the player's health is getting low, it's spending power spheres on bigger attacks and the group heals. It's capable of evaluating the number of enemies it can hit with an area attack to decide whether that would be effective, and it will follow the player's lead sometimes when it comes to which enemies to focus on. We also had to go in and teach the AIs all of the abilities in the game – not just how to use them, but which situations are the best to use them in.

A lot of the class elements come down to range: Lucas knows to get in close, whereas someone like Katarina will try and find space farther back. Classes have different priorities, and the side effects of those priorities can create something that feels like personality at times. Personality AI is a big deal for RPGs in the future. These games are so much about story and character, and having companions come across in their actions with the same personalities they bring to cutscenes is going to be really important.

> "It's about finding the balance where you're working with a teammate rather than a robot"



Does including an AI companion affect every aspect of the game, from level layouts to the complexity of encounters?
It was something we had to keep in mind at all times. When we looked at the AI, we just wanted it to feel like another player, without highlighting the weaknesses of a computer-controlled character. Some of the ways we do that are fairly obvious: the AI doesn't take as much damage from attacks, because they can't dodge as well and they can't choose positions as well. In terms of level design, the biggest challenge wasn't companions, it was actually quadrupeds: they just need a lot more room to turn in an environment, so sometimes we'd get levels back from design that were just too narrow. We'd have to go back and either widen paths or take quadrupeds out. That's why there aren't many wolves in our game.

Real people or AIs: which is the easier player to design and balance a game for overall?
AI's definitely easier, mainly because you always know the kind of things it's going to try to do. You put players in a game, and you really never know. AI, for example, would never try to chain a bunch of enemies together into a single room, just to see if it would work. It would never try to see if it can pull a boss out of its spawn point. It would certainly be easier to make games exclusively for AIs, but, equally, they almost certainly wouldn't be better games. ■

Frozen Synapse

With its multiplayer beta open to preorder customers for the last year, Mode 7's game of tactics and shooting has grown a formidable reputation as a top-down, turn-based *Counter-Strike*. It's well deserved. Even now arriving at release with a substantial singleplayer campaign, it's easy to recommend on the basis of its multiplayer alone, in which players hatch plans for each turn separately but simultaneously, before witnessing how their intentions crash together and resolve.

It manages to be both chaotic and clinical: dynamic enough to catastrophically confound even the most meticulous plans, this is nonetheless a game of tense second-guessing, bluffing and duplicity, one that forces you to engage with the psychology of your opponent and dig deep into the game's mechanisms to eke out every advantage. Viewing the level's abstracted blue topography from above, each player plots movements for his gun-toting squad members in intricate detail, appending waypoints with instructions to stand or duck, aim particularly carefully in one direction, or ignore individual enemies entirely. But the brilliance is this: as you agonise over the finest details of your own team's operation you can plot your opponent's supposed movements too in exactly the same manner, hitting a button at any point to see how all the pieces' paths intertwine. Finally, when satisfied that you have crafted a foolproof approach, or simply gambling on blind luck, you can submit your turn by fearfully clicking the 'Prime' button and wince as the outcome unravels before you in neon, bullets and blood.

Any downtime while waiting for your opponent can be spent flitting between concurrent games, but with such granularity to the commands, one often proves plenty. Though the unfortunate alignment of a series of windows and doors often means a bullet in the head, covering the angles is only small a part of it: there are many other variables which make the difference between life and death – not all of them clearly communicated. The amount of cover, your squaddy's movement speed and his target's movement speed are the more obvious dials with which you can fiddle, but these are all complicated by the interplay of weapons and the inscrutable priorities of the AI. Even when you think you know the ins and outs, the results nearly always surprise – a suddenly exploded wall may give your unit a glimpse of some distant enemy, distracting him long enough for his intended nearby target to fill him with holes. This level of emergence is what makes the game ceaselessly thrilling, but occasionally you do wish you better understood the factors at play. Of course, the ability to test out plans in advance allows you to probe the kinks of the game's systems, and the interface does a mostly commendable job of conveying a large amount of information. There are hiccups, however: tweaking your unit's aim is fussy and misleading, with the dashed line which indicates the direction emerging from a node hovering near your unit rather from the unit itself – a curious choice in a game where line-of-sight is so critical. Attempts to edit the order or detail of actions, meanwhile, often involve deleting the lot and starting again.

Publisher Mode 7
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC
Release Out now

Dynamic enough to confound even the most meticulous plans, this is a game of bluffing and duplicity

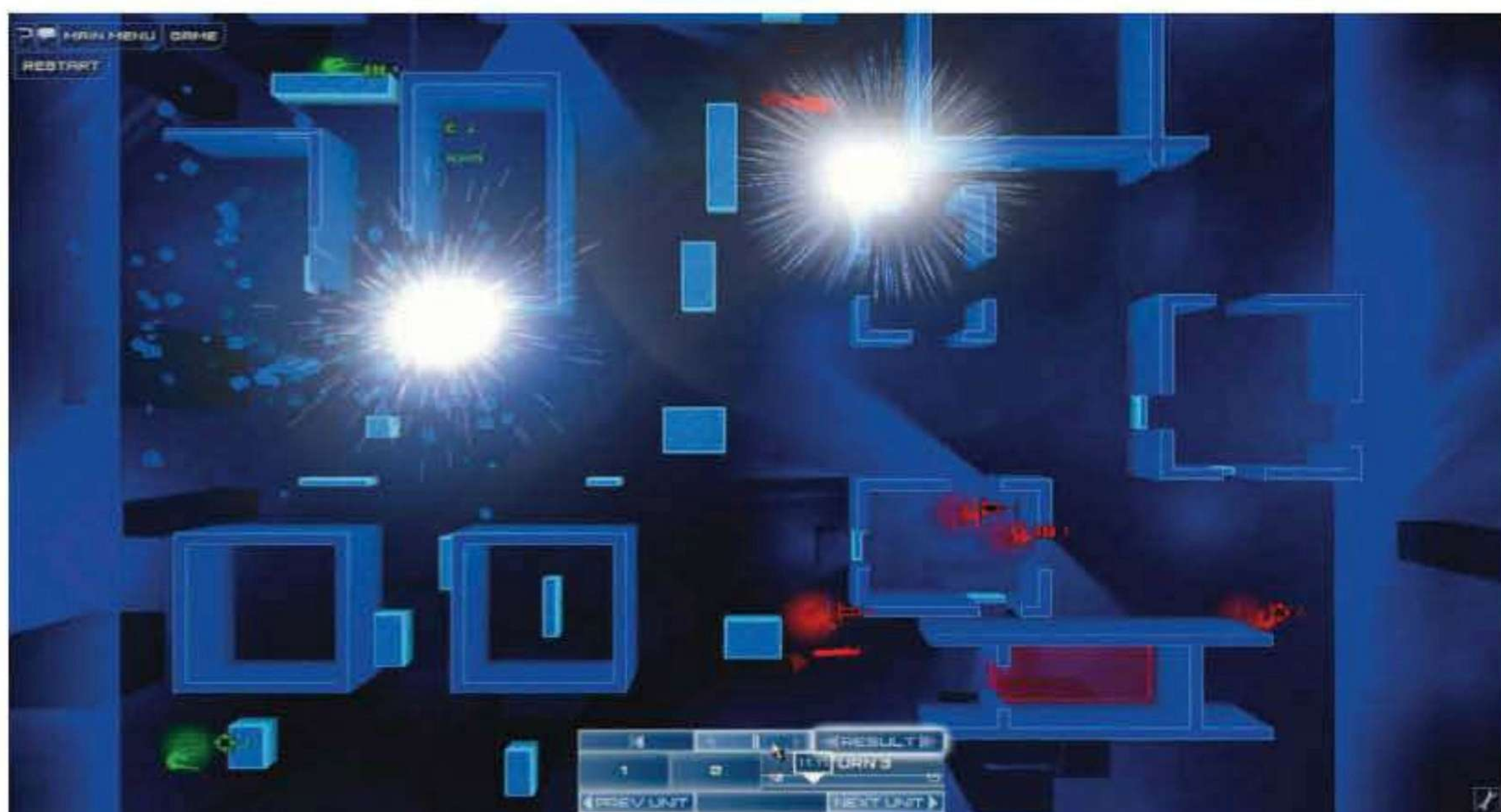


STRIKE A LIGHT
We're still debating whether we prefer the maps 'light' – with all enemy movements visible – or 'dark', so that their positions are concealed unless you have eyes on them directly. Certainly the latter makes for greater tension, but it can also induce paralysing levels of caution. You can still test your plans just as you would in light mode (though here enemies are represented by ghostly last known position markers which you can pick up and drop around the level at will), but if your intelligence is stale, you can easily get bogged down plotting the ever-increasing possibilities.

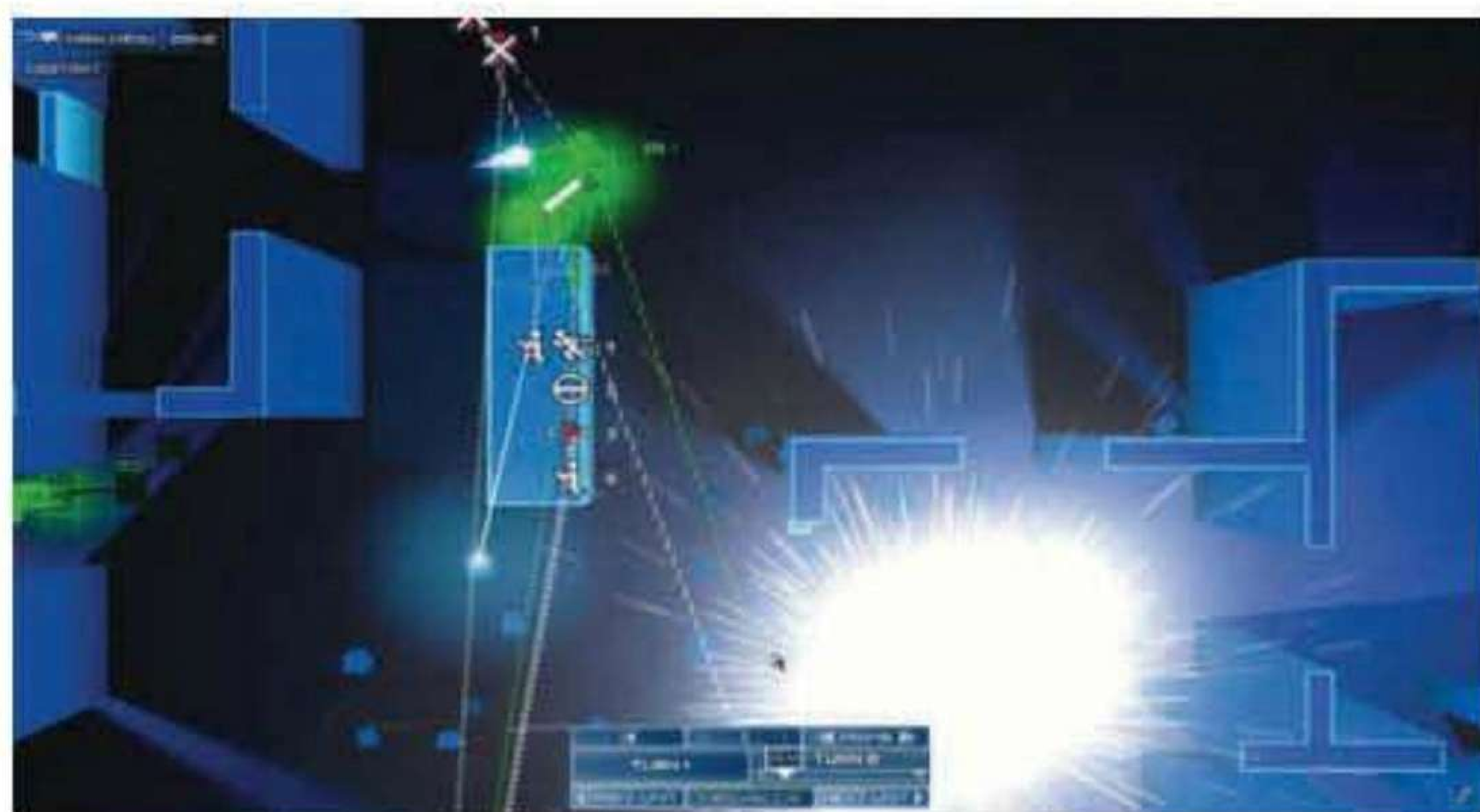
But these are gripes – the fundamentals of the game are intoxicating. Finnicky and opaque though it sometimes is, the various foibles of the interface are quickly circumvented with practice. This kernel offers a repeatable delight by itself, and yet it is flanked by a 55-mission-strong singleplayer campaign. Being cut from the same cloth as multiplayer, the campaign offers no great mechanical shift and its charms (save for the dauntingly smart AI) are much the same. Nonetheless, it's far more than an offline training mode for the real deal: instead, it's a robust and varied sequence of challenges, juggling defence, offence and yet more unusual objectives, always lent a degree of craft and clever asymmetry missing from the randomised but level playing field of multiplayer. One mission sees your small squad face a host of entrenched rocket launchers, which you can simultaneously detonate so long as you survive long enough to infiltrate a control room; another forces you to hunker down and hold ground against an overwhelming attacking force or safeguard a VIP through a bloody retreat. Another favourite makes a wry nod to the famed lobby scene from The Matrix, with the player taking on the role of the beleaguered security guards, trying to lock down the columned antechamber as shotgun-wielding assailants pour through the metal detectors. Most surprising of all, however, is that the narrative offers wit and an intriguing world to neatly frame the abstracted bouts of combat: via the talking heads in the mission briefings and a smattering of background dossiers, *Frozen Synapse* tells a tale of political struggle in an age when half of humanity's existence has been subsumed by the digital. It's literate and not just a little clever, but its tongue is careful never to stray too far from its cheek either. Few games can claim to have jokes about unhandled exception errors.

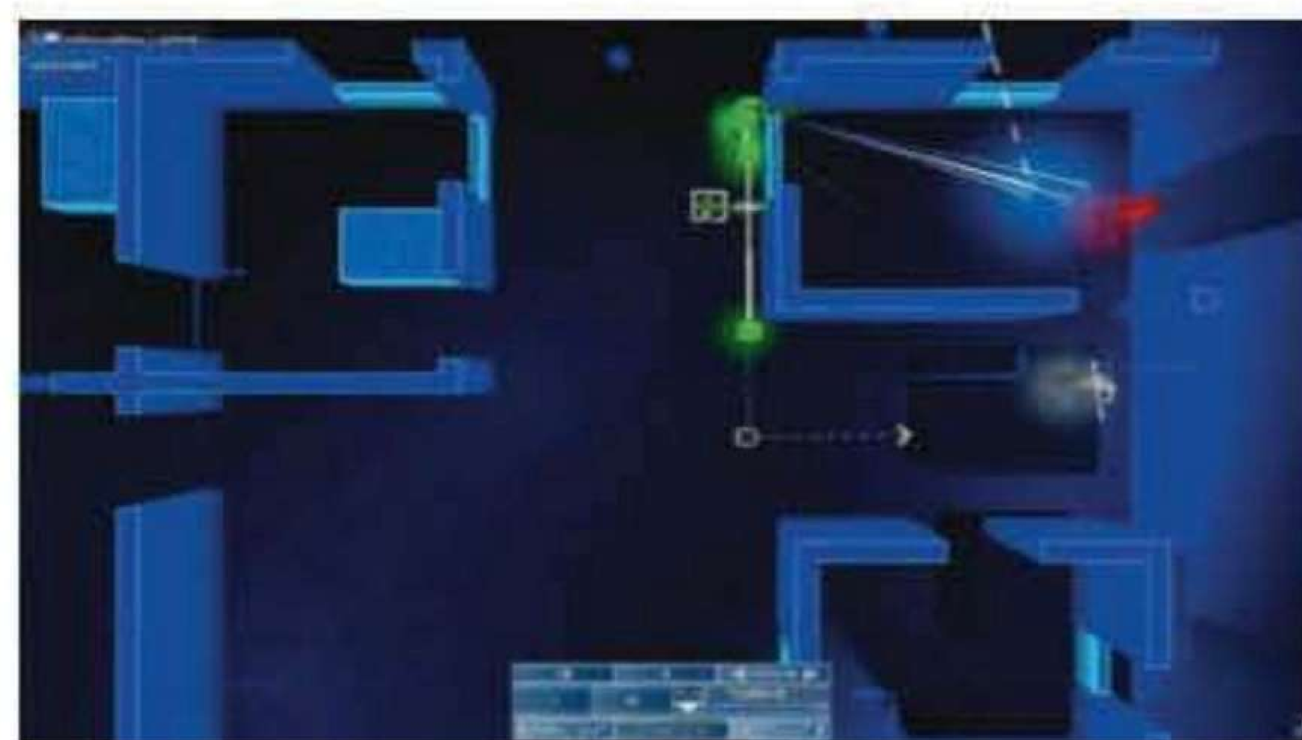
There is a wealth of game modes besides – ones which demand territorial control, hostage rescue, or the plundering of data – each of which can be played 'dark', meaning that only the last known location of enemy troops is visible to you. Then there's the matchmaking, in-built chat and integration with YouTube: this is a sizeable offering. Yet, thanks to its gripping central tenets of simultaneous scheming and emergent multiplayer, you may never even notice.

9



RIGHT Shotgunners, machine-gunners and snipers will, by default, stop and fire on targets they see. Rocketeers and grenadiers always have to be told when and where to shoot – meaning you have to anticipate enemy movements. A controversial tactic is to distract enemies, popping out of cover just long enough to break their aim.
BELOW Rockets may seem overpowered at first, but the units wielding them are just as vulnerable to bullets and move extremely slowly





ABOVE The pathfinding is usually fine, but it does occasionally have its stumbles – plotting bizarrely circuitous routes or snagging your units on scenery. It's best to test out your plans before committing to them



If under fire from rockets, it's best to move away from scenery – soldiers are easily killed by splash damage. Dashing between cover can also help a shotgunner get in close

Post Script

Interview: Ian Hardingham and Paul Taylor, co-founders, Mode 7

In the week following its release, *Frozen Synapse*'s server was being hammered by 5,000 players at any one time. For the beta, the number of simultaneous connections had topped out around 120. Now that teething issues have been set aside, we sit down with two of the three-man indie team to talk telemetry and ongoing tweaks in the light of the game's launch.

Now you have a larger player base you must get a lot of telemetry data – any interesting post-release observations about the way people play?
Ian Hardingham The biggest statistic I can think of is that 80 per cent of matches are completed – I thought you'd get a lot more people rage-quitting or forgetting about games.
Paul Taylor We look at usage patterns: people get very excited about the game at the start and they play it all the time. We wanted *Frozen Synapse* to settle into a routine in the rest of your gaming life, and I think from the usage data we can see that people are leaving it for a while and coming back later and doing odd matches – and that's exactly what we wanted.
IH Many people log on, take a single turn and then log straight back off. It's very different from firstperson shooters, which are much more session based.


Ian Hardingham


Paul Taylor

Are you going to continue to iterate?
IH We're doing a lot of improvements for a patch. Lots of usability things. People get very upset about other people not finishing games. And it's too difficult to organise tournaments at the moment.

What can you do to encourage game finishing?
IH The system we're putting in is that after two weeks if you haven't taken a turn you basically concede so your points go to your opponent. We don't want it to be a viable tactic to go up the leaderboards by only finishing games that you have an advantage in.
PT That sort of thing should be quite subtle. It should be about preventing exploitation of systems rather than pushing people into doing specific things. Because obviously we want people to have the long-form game you want, but this is about shutting down annoying behaviour.

There are a few choices that aren't clear to us: why plot the aiming vector from a separate node for certain units, for instance?
IH That's an interesting one. Paul and I had massive arguments about it. And we honestly tried everything, and that was the thing that worked the best by a long way. I think if you have the aiming vector coming from the waypoint then you just can't work out the sequence of your orders; you may wish to spot three different locations from the same waypoint.
PT The problem with aiming is that it has a temporal start and end and a direction. When you're defining three things like that in a simple way, it's pretty hard.

"I wanted to come up with my own mythology of a future Internet and the factions fighting over territory"



The singleplayer scenarios offer asymmetry – how far can you push that?
IH One early thing we came up with was that it was all about the unit combinations. It's a really significantly different match when you've got one rocket launcher and you're trying to kill five shotgunners to when you've got two machine-gunners and a grenade launcher versus three shotgunners. These are really tactically different scenarios.
PT The AI ended up having a bit of a personality of its own: you can't really create an optimal AI to play the game, because it's based on individual situations, so giving the AI a weird set of units and then seeing what happened was the genesis of quite a lot of those levels. We did cut a couple which were just stupid, like all rocket launchers versus all rocket launchers.

The plot is this witty and intriguing science fiction – it's surprising that it's there at all. What were you aiming for with it?
PT I think a lot of people try to do cyberpunk – and I'm not saying I've nailed it or anything – but they don't go for it in a wholehearted way. I wanted to come up with my own mythology of a future Internet and the various factions that would be fighting over territory and the mechanics of the world behind it. I like big, ambitious, slightly over-the-top stories in games which don't necessarily suit that. Having to work your writing around a card game or around little instances of combat, that's such an interesting thing to do. I think my biggest influence is *Wing Commander* – there are little cues all the time that you are part of this bigger world. But if you have big ambitions, you've got to meet the player somewhere, and so having some more comical characters or bizarre stuff going on is a way of reaching out to the player and saying, hey, this isn't as massively pretentious as it could be.

We spotted a level that nods to the Matrix lobby scene – what other references have we missed?
PT There's an Amiga Power reference which no one has got yet. There's some references to an interactive fiction game which nobody has got. There's some Samuel Beckett stuff in there – just as I was saying it was unpretentious! I like leaving in obscure stuff for the five people who'll find it and think it's incredible that someone bothered to put that in. ■

Red Faction: Armageddon

Videogames have always found it easier to explore the joy of destruction than the joy of creation. It's a fact hard-coded into *Red Faction: Armageddon*'s control scheme. One button is allocated to repairing the world around you. Squeeze it and protagonist Darius Mason will extend his hand, wizard-like, while broken bridges, smashed computer terminals and fallen walls reassemble themselves before him. By contrast, almost every other button on the controller is used to tear down the world that Volition has created for Mason to exist in.

In part that's due to the engine, a powerful piece of technology that has evolved significantly over the course of the series. Almost every structure in the game can be torn down, be it with Mason's giant sledgehammer – which will bite chunks of concrete from an office block or swipe the girders from under a water tower – or with an electric shock-gust that can be shot from his right hand, unleashing a vicious wind that decimates matter as it passes through it.

Red Faction: Armageddon's world, while unstable – collapsing at the mere suggestion of interaction – feels pleasingly weighty, and the slabs of concrete and metal that fall about your head show off what is one of gaming's greatest technological playgrounds for demolition. This flattening of the world's assets is positively encouraged: salvage pickups are the currency used to upgrade Mason's abilities in a cycle of ever-increasing violence.

Likewise, a broad array of creative weaponry gives endless ways in which to bring the house down around you. There are the traditional rocket and grenade launchers, turning structures to rubble in their angry blast radius. But there are also more unusual arms, such as the Nano Rifle, which disintegrates objects and enemies in a shower of particles, or the Magnet Gun, which will charge one object before making another magnetic, allowing entire structures to be brought down on to a foe's head in what has to be one of the most imaginative weapons since *Perfect Dark*'s Farsight Rifle.

Armageddon banks on the desire to destroy, tapping into our toddler urge to knock over the tower of bricks a sibling has piled high, or kick over the sandcastle. And there are many times where it's a gamble that pays off. Take out the support from one end of a 50ft bridge and it will creak and scream as it collapses around you. The power to change your environment in big, shocking strikes can be enthralling, and while collecting the blue packets of salvage that occupy the midst of any rubble you create may be an awkward abstraction, it at least serves to give the riotous violence a wider goal.

It has to, because the story certainly falls short in this regard. The dialogue, while sprinkled with marine-speak cliché, is surprisingly robust. But the story it serves is vanilla. Mason is a likeable enough but ultimately forgettable lead, while the supporting cast fails to imprint on the memory or heart. The premise, which has Mason escaping subterranean Martian mines for over half of the game, makes for a very dark and brown journey (and somewhat limits the amount of destruction that can be achieved for a huge proportion of the title). And while its predecessor *Red Faction: Guerrilla* was a world of red sand and sunsets, here the atmosphere is murky and oppressive, even when finally emerging above ground to dust-filled night skies.

Publisher THQ
Developer Volition
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

The size of the interactive vocabulary open to you allows for some enthralling moments of action

Light isn't the only thing to have been discarded from the previous game. The open-world structure has been traded in for a more orthodox, linear march. But Volition fails to capitalise on the set-piece format, and memorable prescribed moments are few and far between. Rather, the developer leans on emergent play to provide the talking points.

Once the game recovers from a slow start and presses all of the key mechanics into the player's hands, it's decidedly more successful. The size of the interactive vocabulary open to you allows for some engaging moments of action, and the fun that can be had with the physics-bending weaponry at times surpasses *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun for freeform thrills. But the failure to find interesting, prescribed tasks for these weapons is frustrating. It's difficult to shake the feeling that had a studio such as Valve been given the magnet gun, it would have found ingenious, semi-structured uses for it. As it stands, it's a toy: fun to mess around with, but wholly optional.

But for all the wonder of the engine, and the creativity of its systems and mechanics, Volition falls short with repetitive level design and set-pieces that fail to inspire. Likewise, just as the cast of characters bores, so the enemy designs fail to show any of the imagination that has gone into the methods used to dispose of them. So indistinguishable are the designs that the game resorts to colour-coding enemies with a surrounding glow – providing a more immediate visual clue as to their attack patterns and weaknesses than the designs themselves.

While the game suffers in its first half by being set underground, where structures are repetitive and constricted by space, the latter portions of the game disappoint by removing almost all destructible elements. The decision to discard *Red Faction*'s unique attribute is plain odd, although it is more evidence that an engine alone is not enough to sustain a long-form videogame. Once again, Volition delivers exceptional tech, but fails to shape it into a truly engaging and sustaining experience.

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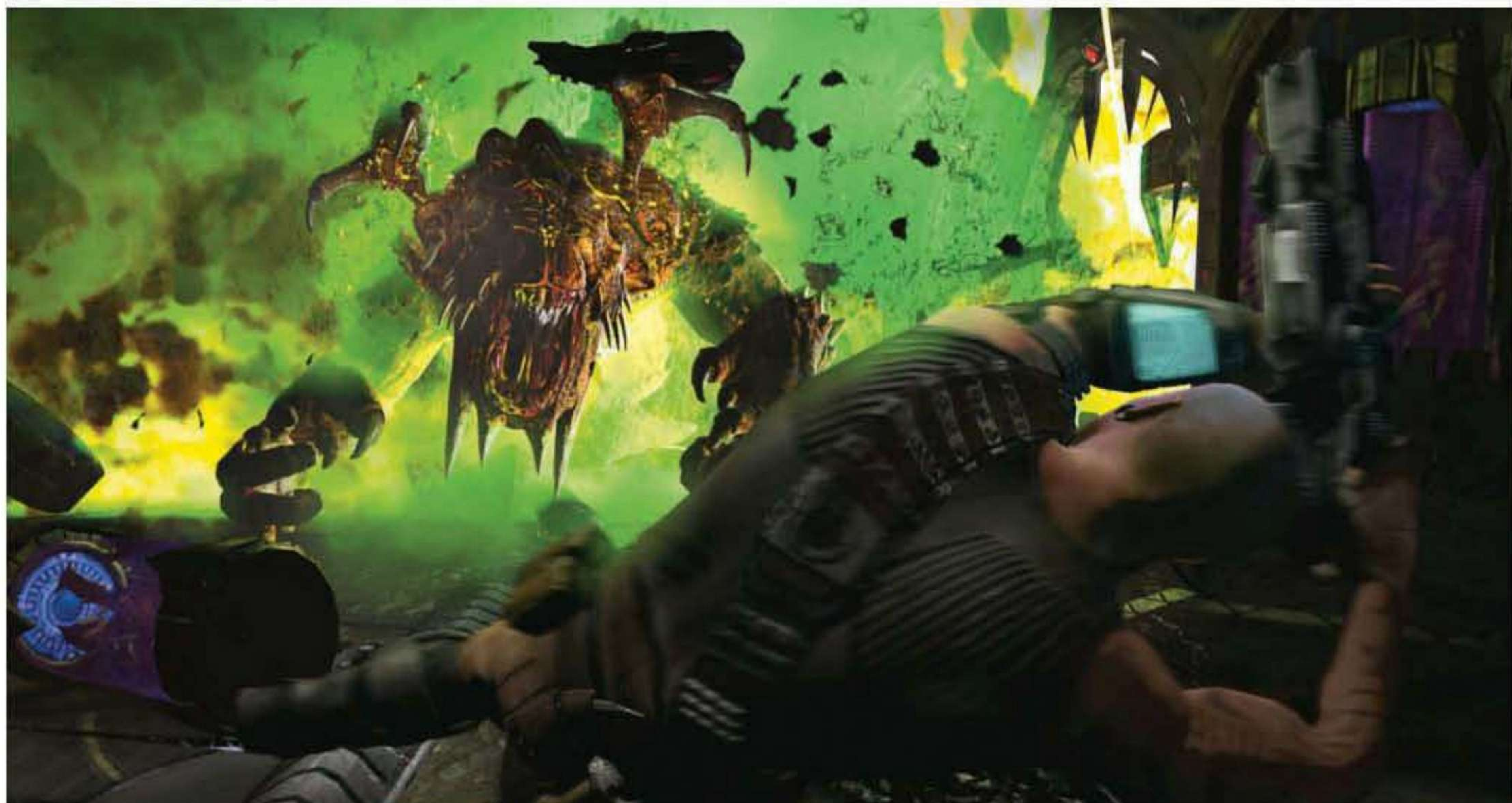


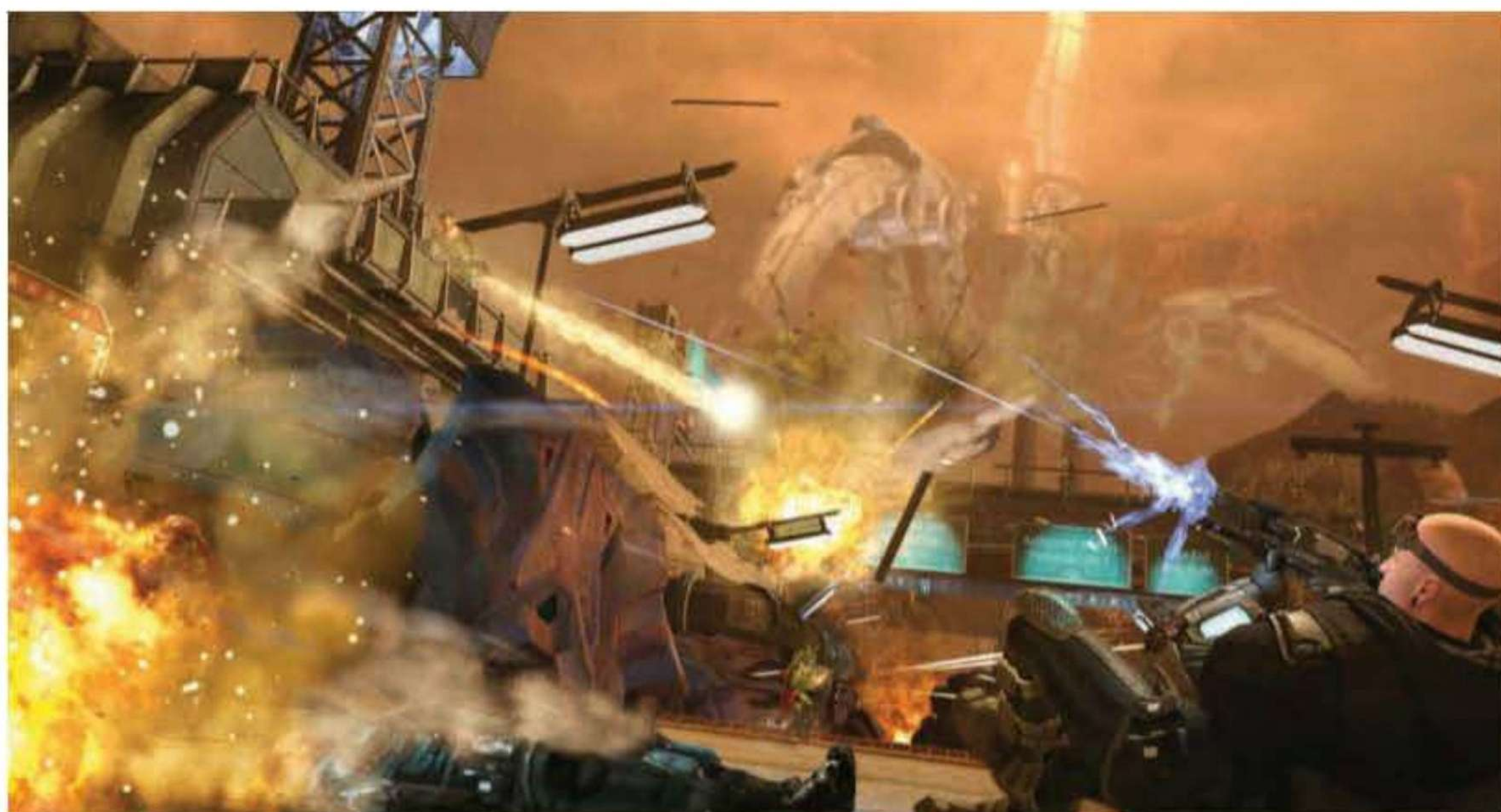
SPLASH DAMAGE
Armageddon falls back on tried-and-tested clichés outside of the campaign, too, with the Horde-alike Infestation mode offering *Robotron* waves of enemies to dispatch three other players, using a more limited arsenal than the one available in the singleplayer mode. While it's possible to revive teammates, lives are limited. One more mode fleshes out multiplayer: Ruin, a competitive time-trial demolition endeavour in which you attempt to cause the most damage. Both offerings are competent but unremarkable, and unlikely to foster a long or mid-term community.



ABOVE Set 50 years after the events of *Red Faction: Guerrilla*, the game's main character is Darius Mason, grandson of Alec Mason and Samanya, the protagonists of the earlier game. The aliens (below) are new, however







TOP RIGHT At times Mason will be given the keys to a mech suit, able to fire fistfuls of rockets at aliens while sweeping his line of sight with pitter-patter machine gunfire. **LEFT** The environmental destruction provides a tactical weaponry element, allowing players to bring down scenic elements on enemies. It's a handy answer to being surrounded and outgunned

Hunted: The Demon's Forge

Do-it-yourself conspiracy theory, step 1: write the word 'Wargar' – the name of the orc-like race at the centre of *Hunted: The Demon's Forge* – down on a sheet of paper. We'll wait here while you find a pen. Step 2: splice the word in half at the syllable break. Finished? Step 3: swap the order of these two words. If you've followed instructions properly, you should have arrived at the nonsensical phrase 'gar War.' Step 4: sandwich the preposition 'of' between the two words to get 'gar of War'. Step 5: hold your head firmly with both hands as the epiphany enters your brain like a sniper bullet catching a Locust Drone between the eyes. If you're lucky, the applied pressure will keep your head from a similarly messy combustion.

The above theory wildly over-reaches, admittedly so, but given *Hunted*'s sycophantic adherence to the design principles behind Epic's *Gears Of War* saga, can you blame us? *Hunted* appears convinced that its borrowing will go down easier if it footnotes the nakedly obvious source text. Hence the inclusion of an achievement that reads, "Obtain an Epic quality weapon" (holy strategic capitalisation, Batman!). It's like the whole dev team at inXile collectively decided that if *Hunted* flopped and they landed back in the job market, they'd all be relocating to North Carolina to work on the inevitable *Gears* prequel that will keep Epic's bean-counters happy once the trilogy wraps.

A cover-based, thirdperson shooter and brawler, *Hunted* follows the exploits of two mercenaries – E'lara and Caddoc – who stumble into a quest to save the land of Kala Moor from the marauding Wargar. In predictable high-fantasy fashion, the pair must battle their way through swamps, caves, dungeons, forests, slave-filled quarries and arson-ravaged medieval villages, pressing ever closer to the foreboding summit where their destiny awaits. There isn't a Tolkienism in existence that *Hunted* fails to trot out for a weary victory lap. So despite some atmospheric, if nigglingly familiar, world-building – Epic's Unreal Engine imbues Kala Moor with genuine verve – you never quite shake the feeling that *Hunted* takes place in Middling-earth. As far as Tolkien ringers go, *Hunted*'s tone is less Game of Thrones and more Dragonlance.

The game's protagonists are about what you'd expect. E'lara is the prototypical sexy elf and skilled archer who has managed to shrewdly fashion an entire outfit out of a single leather belt, with tribal tattoos stretching and curling like creeping ivy across her legs and inner thighs before vanishing beneath a scandalous excuse for a thong. Melee-favouring Caddoc gets to be a sex object in his own right, provided you're into chiselled abs and elephantine, triangular torsos. *Hunted*'s primary gameplay enticement revolves around the pair's co-op adventuring, and the script dials up the romantic tension accordingly. E'lara and Caddoc are

Publisher Bethesda
Developer inXile
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

There isn't a Tolkienism in existence that Hunted fails to trot out for a weary victory lap



caricatures, sure, but the writing is just strong enough to keep them on the right side of flimsy.

If you've played *Gears Of War*, *Hunted*'s combat and level progression will feel cosily intuitive. Each level consists of a series of open battlefields, sprinkled with banks of chest-high cover to duck behind as Wargar archers send arrows whizzing by overhead. There is, expectedly, a range of weapons for the pair to find throughout the game, uncovered by smashing weapon racks to splinters.

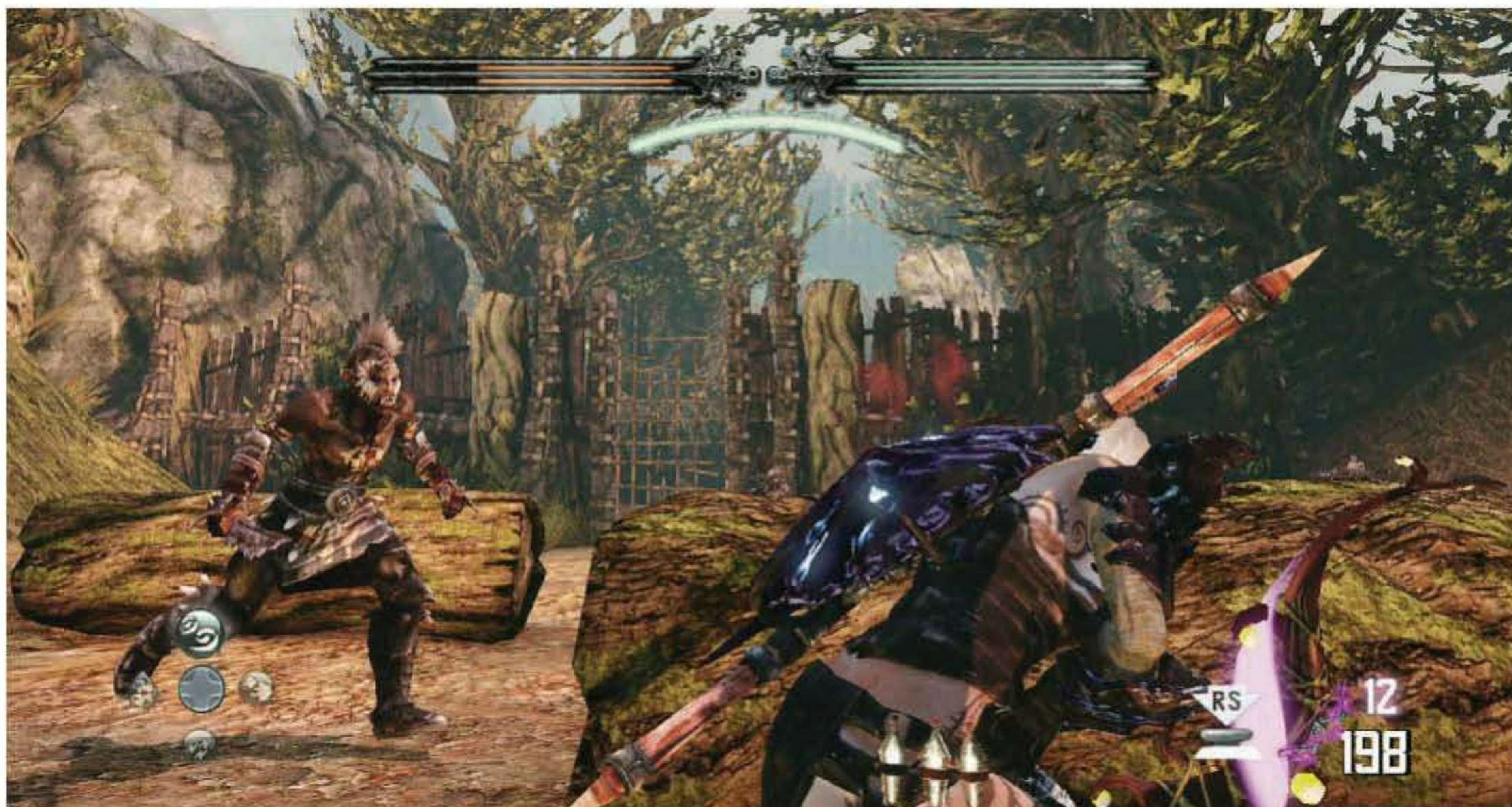
Bows are classified by their damage-dealing properties and their rate of fire (slow, medium and fast). A slow bow is effectively a high-fantasy sniper rifle, dealing heavy damage but balanced with a sluggish reload. The medium and fast bows can be fired like assault rifles, mashing the trigger down and sending off a steady auto-fire stream of arrows, which can be aimed or blind-fired. Melee combat allows you mix medium and heavy attacks into standard combos – with block mapped to the left trigger.

Both E'lara and Caddoc can fight with arrow or blade, but their abilities are heavily weighted in favour of shooting things and hitting things, respectively. In practice, this means one player engages in some solid cover-based shooting while the other grinds through the thick of the crowd. In order to spur co-operation, both players have access to magic attacks which can be used to temporarily buff each other's weapon or – more interestingly – set up enemies for combined attacks. Caddoc can use a Force-like power to lift Wargar haplessly into the air while E'lara systematically picks them off with ease. Or she can use arrows enchanted with ice magic to freeze enemies in place, after which Caddoc's rush attack might as well be a rodeo bull goring a piece of delicate crystal stemware.

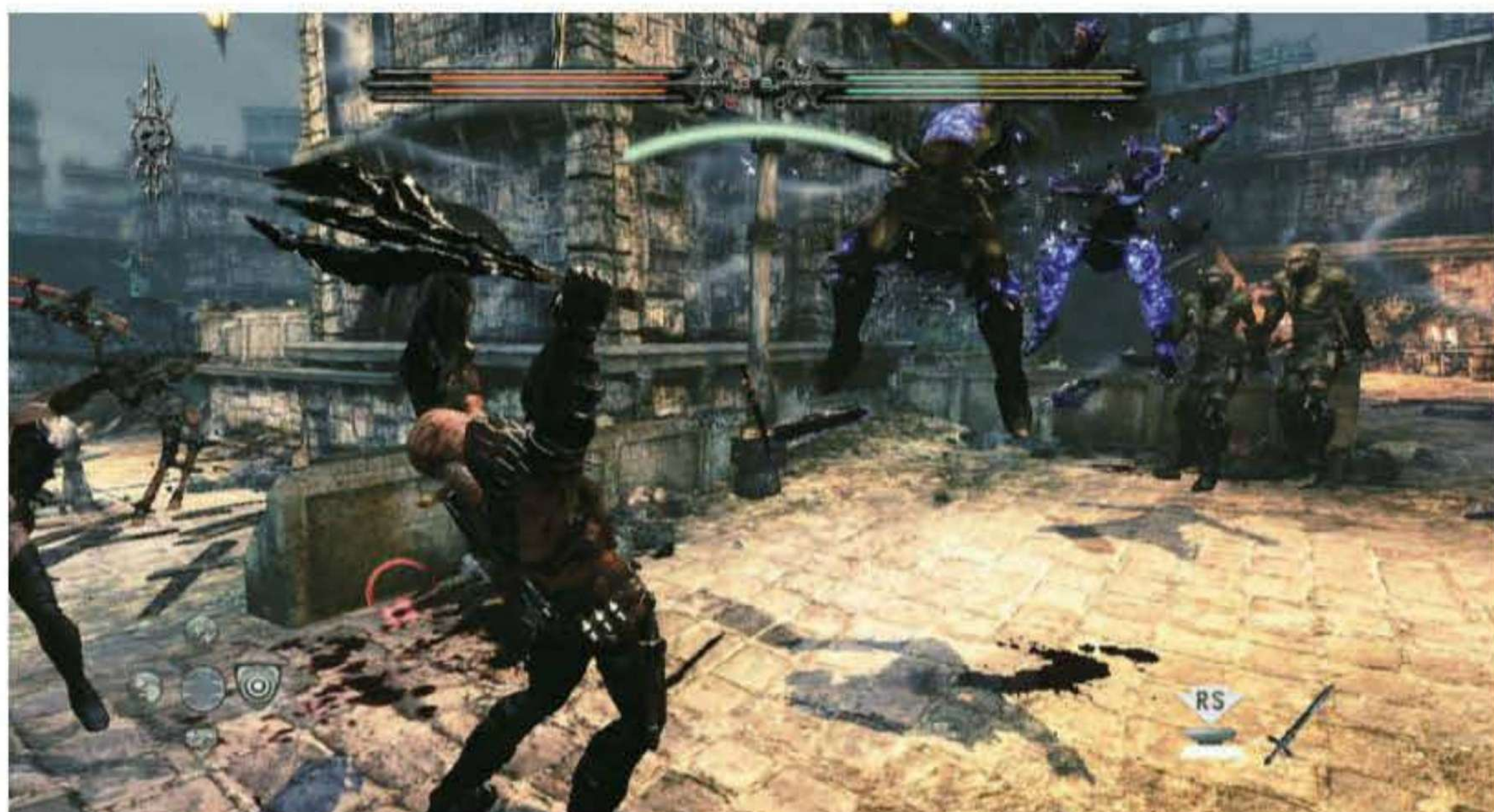
These co-operative moments are the exception, not the rule, sadly – the Wargar attack in waves large and relentless enough to make wider co-ordination simply not worth the effort in the heat of battle. Caddoc feels like an imposing house guest in E'lara's *Gears* clone, especially since the cover-based level design means ranged fighting provides a tactical satisfaction entirely absent from Caddoc's hack-and-slash tedium.

Like a horse swishing its tail with futile persistence, *Hunted* never manages to rid itself of bugs. If you're standing over a weapon drop when your partner triggers a cutscene, the heads-up weapon comparison hovers clumsily above as it plays out. Your character occasionally refuses to scoop up clearly visible health potions. And close-range enemies neatly lined up in your aiming reticule will fail to register your shots with annoying regularity. Despite the cloud of bugs pestering its flanks, the grafted DNA in its cells and co-op play's baffling lack of drop-in/drop-out functionality, *Hunted* delivers an improbably fun gallop.

6



ABOVE The bows E'lara can wield in *Hunted* are classified by damage-dealing ability and rate of fire. Just like a sniper rifle, the slow bow has a sluggish reload but does extra damage and has a double zoom.
RIGHT After selecting a special ability using the D-pad, you unleash it by pressing the right bumper button. Caddoc's levitate spell proves especially lethal in co-op play, as E'Lara can then use the floating enemies for target practice



BELOW A minotaur would normally be one of the more difficult enemies, but E'lara has chugged some glowing liquid called sleig, which absurdly overpowers her for a single battle





ABOVE Just like *Gears*, E'lara can execute a downed enemy by hitting B – a flourish where the camera trails the arrow through the air to the target's head – however, the animation takes so long you'll soon avoid it entirely

White Knight Chronicles 2

As with any popular genre, the cry will occasionally rise: is the JRPG dead? In the presence of *White Knight Chronicles 2*, it's easy to see why. This is the kind of game that feels stillborn.

The opening is witless: after several long cutscenes that explain nothing, you're plonked into what looks like a standard character creation menu. But hold, varlet! To access certain hairstyles and accoutrements for your character, you must spend money – real money, that is, not in-game gold. This is your first interaction in a full-price console RPG.

And it's far from the last microtransaction you'll come across. This is because *WKC2* overhauls the first game's limited multiplayer in favour of an on-the-go quest system, distinct from the singleplayer campaign, for up to six participants, styling itself as something of an ongoing commitment for players. Thus *WKC2* is two games in one: a singleplayer RPG and a gigantic, quest-based multiplayer offering running in parallel. Given Level-5's previous success combining single- and multiplayer modes in *Dragon Quest IX*, not to mention the original's flawed but promising online offering, you'd be forgiven for expecting a better result.

The problem is that the experiences run in parallel rather than intertwining – neither is meaningful for the other. Your character is consistent, keeping XP and loot across sessions, but other than that and the half-hearted 'Georama' feature, which lets you create a home to show off, these games might as well exist separately.

Worse, *WKC2* has the kind of combat system that feels absolutely compromised by the need to accommodate online play. It's the same active time-based system familiar from the original game, though thankfully it now moves around twice as fast as *WKC*'s deathly slow pace. Its MMOG-type roles are still built around weapon classes, but the distinctions here are much clearer and the game leans towards making you dual-specialise characters, lending a little dynamism.

Though you can issue party commands, micromanaging your party is a nightmare, requiring multiple menu trips to transfer control for every switch. Being able to set general parameters is the consolation, and works well enough but feels like a blunt tool. Whatever else *Final Fantasy XIII* got wrong, it managed a battle system on similar principles which absolutely demolishes Level-5's effort. Where *FFXIII*'s combat was fluid, intense and subtle, *WKC2*'s is plodding, repetitive and clunky. There's just no punch here.

What really kills *WKC2* as an experience, however, is the travelling and quest structure. Through long corridors with forest wallpaper, the thankless trudges from location to location are jam-packed full of repeating battles against minor enemies. Mixing exploration with combat is one thing, but these battles are never challenging or especially rewarding, despite the occasional loot drop. It's the kind of repetitive filler that gives grinding a bad name, and sees you eventually just weaving a path around enemy encounters.

And why are you travelling? You're almost always on a fetch quest, taking irrelevant trinket A to person B or finding object C. There's a total absence of inspiration in *WKC2*'s structure, and a slavish devotion to traditional design – even neat ideas, like randomly generated side quests, are let down by the pancake-flat execution and paucity of unique content. Players can earn currency through errand and bounty missions, which ostensibly offers an alternative to the grind, but it's let down by to the fact that Level-5 has constructed about six mission types for a game whose duration runs to scores of hours.

Publisher SCE
Developer Level-5
Format PS3
Release Out now

In order to access certain hairstyles and accoutrements, you must spend money – real money, that is



WHITE KNIGHT 1.5
WKC2 comes with a reworked version of the first game as a bonus, though contrary to early reports you can begin *WKC2* without a *WKC* save file. Much of the prerelease talk around *WKC2* centred on how it would fix the faults of the original, and it's clear certain elements are much smoother: the increased speed of the battle system is a godsend, and *WKC2*'s online games are now blessed with chat. *WKC2* adds its own neat touches, too, our favourite being the ability to customise your own Incorruptus (a scene-stealing summon monster) to take online.

The game's best idea, and the one around which its battle system revolves, are the robotic behemoths that can be summoned into battle. Bigger fights involve killing smaller enemies to acquire Action Chips, which are then used to summon these towering forms, and after handing out a pummelling, the process is repeated. They're essential tanks and damage-dealers against bosses, and offer new abilities to make them capable of turning a fight in seconds. It means the big battles, despite all of *WKC2*'s problems, have their moments.

Environments are pleasant enough, albeit light on detail, but in terms of interaction they may as well be wrapped in cellophane. Characters, meanwhile, move in a disconnected, floaty manner that will be familiar to JRPG veterans, while the impact of bigger bosses is eroded by their limbs frequently clipping through scenery. And the characters' expressionless faces, in the many hours of cutscene you'll have to sit through, aren't exactly engaging.

In fact, it's hard to keep a handle on *WKC2*'s story in general, not because of the frequent zipping between strands, but simply because you've heard this kind of stuff – protagonist Leonard, who has the power to turn into the mythical White Knight, must stop an evil villain from assembling an ultimate weapon – many times before. Perhaps there are fans out there breathlessly awaiting the end of Leonard's saga, but we certainly don't know many.

Ultimately, that is the tragedy of *WKC2* – clearly, this is a game designed in response to very specific criticisms of the original. The impulse is commendable, but what Level-5 has created is a Frankenstein's monster. It's half singleplayer and half multiplayer, and both of them are half good: a compromise that leaves much of this game feeling soulless. To give *WKC2* its due, it certainly improves on the original. But in trying to fix a poor template rather than start anew, it was probably doomed from the beginning.

4







ABOVE Saving is done at set points, which for the most part is fine; there are several boss battles, however, that have a large grind between them and the save point you'll be returning to after a lost battle. It's a foible that does nothing but annoy. **LEFT** The most outrageous of *WKC2*'s many nickel-and-diming moments is charging players to remake their avatar from scratch, entailing the purchase of a 'Makeover Ticket'. In an MMOG it may work; here, it just seems very mean-spirited indeed

ABOVE There are some great additions to the Incorruptus abilities. Turn break, which lets you interrupt boss attack animations and gives a chance to stagger them, lets you deal crazy amounts of damage. **RIGHT** The fights are let down by an archaic animation system that drains all impact from the blows, and it's initially bewildering – *WKC2* dumps you straight in with a maxed-out character and no tutorials which, despite the original game being included, seems like extraordinary complacency



Alice: Madness Returns

Regularly promoted alongside *Shadows Of The Damned* (see p106), there are few finer stablemates for Suda 51's descent into hell than American McGee's *Alice: Madness Returns*. Both herald from digital auteurs encroaching on familiar territory – hell and Lewis Carroll – and both lack ideas to match their visual invention. This is a Burton-esque Wonderland; in fact, it's more Burton-esque than the director's own attempt. Epic's Unreal engine lives up to its name: not since *Mario Galaxy* has a game pumped out such a babble of visual styles. If the spirit of Carroll exists at all in *Madness Returns*, it is in the constant hunger for the next oddity.

But this is normalcy reskinned as nonsense. Platforming repeats the same networks of floating squares and upward gusts from level to level, hoping to disguise this by changing what is jumped on. A floating platform is a floating platform whether it's a mah-jong tile, playing card or iceberg. And so it is with so much of *Madness Returns*: mushrooms, pig snouts and potions repurposed as springs, switches and unlockable concept art. One thudding inevitability after the next.

There is bite to the combat, however. With a familiar lock-on camera and an emphasis on matching weapons to abomination, it feels a lot like *Zelda*. Link can't dematerialise into butterflies like Alice, but he would surely appreciate the need to peel enemies down to their fleshy cores with the right combination of pepper-grinder guns and hobby-horse thwacks. Finally, the feel catches up with the look: scalding tea barrages thump through shields (with a delightful glass shattering sound) as the Vorpal Sword stings with a true snicker-snack. Enemy designers keep new forms (and attack strategies) coming, mixing various breeds to concoct fresh battle rhythms.

Only in combat does Alice truly find her footing. Unlike Garcia Hotspur's bellowing rampage through perdition, Alice is an unsure presence. Her mind is faltering, cutting from Victorian London – largely non-interactive film sets – to Wonderland. It has the air of a narrative device, but to what end? If there are parallels to be drawn – does Wonderland reflect real-world predicaments? – they are hard to see. McGee's fiction is Cheshire Cat cryptic, decipherable only by those well versed in his universe. To others, the story unfolds as a series of fetch missions given by ugly versions of iconic fantasy figures.

The game's visual and combative energy spark the urge to see where it goes next. If only there was something to do when you get there.

5

Publisher EA
Developer Spicy Horse
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now



CURIOSITIES
Repetitive action is broken up with curious distractions. Teaching a fish to sing the Carpenter's latest tune involves tapping through *Guitar Hero* notation. A later dip in the Mock Turtle's sub cuts to a few minutes of side-scrolling shooting, but goodwill soon makes for frustration with the sloppy mechanics. A trip into a portrait sees the game become a delicately inked 2D platformer. Think 2D *Okami*. The level design outclasses those in 3D, and there's a real charm to the ornate landscape.

Hysteria mode allows Alice a dramatic last stand when her health falls, unleashing some of the game's most striking effects. Colour drains from the world, and supercharged attacks are meted out with bloodied weapons



Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D

Like its proto-Horde predecessor that debuted as an unlockable mode in *Resident Evil 4*, *The Mercenaries* is a time trial of violence, pitting the overmatched player against an endless stream of slow, relentless enemies. You shoot, you run out of ammo, and you spend the latter half of the round trying to escape via rooftops and catwalks, in a desperate attempt to avoid the zero score that awaits anyone who fails to survive until the end.

The trick to conserving the scarce ammunition is relying almost entirely on melee attacks. A single shot to the leg will hobble an enemy, providing a brief window of opportunity to deliver a punch to the face or a roundhouse kick that results in a clean kill. Reinforcing the idea that the most effective technique in this ostensibly gun-based game is in fact going hand-to-hand, five seconds are added to the clock every time you pummel a zombie. With the time pressure slightly lessened, it's easy to settle into an immensely satisfying rhythm of shooting and punching that sees you rack up the combo multiplier and push ever closer to a high score.

As a standalone game rather than the bonus mode it once was, *Mercenaries* has been beefed up with extra characters and stages – eight of each, all taken from previous *Resident Evil* titles. Weapon loadouts can be swapped around, so one character with a preferred melee move can be combined with the superior weaponry of another, and there's a selection of 30 different perks that can be upgraded in three steps. A single run through the game from start to finish can be completed in a worryingly short amount of time, however.

The eight stages are repeated over five different sets of missions, the first two of which are little more than training exercises. Only the final two sets offer a significant challenge, and in the entire game the wave-based formula defined right at the start of the tutorial is altered just twice – for a single boss battle and one, longer, wave-based level. However good the core mechanics may be, it's disappointing to see them applied with so little variety.

Mercenaries shines as a twoplayer game, where an organised pair can extend the time limit and toy with the enemies well beyond the point at which sub-bosses with one-shot kills of their own begin to show up. It can't entirely compensate for the lack of depth, but wading together into a throng of the undead, guns blazing and fists flying, leaving a trail of dissolving bodies in your wake, is without question a grisly pleasure.

6

Publisher Capcom
Developer In-house
Format 3DS
Release July 1



PRIME PERKS
Players can equip any three of 30 unlockable perks, providing enhancements to weapon and melee skills, improving the chance of a head-popping critical hit and boosting their health level or recovery time. Each one can be levelled up via continuous use, and when you get to the final stage of one of the most effective melee perks every attack is supplemented with an electric shock that stuns multiple enemies, allowing a co-op partner to finish them off in style.

Larger enemies, such as this Garrador, can absorb huge amounts of damage while dishing out one-hit kills. Ideally you'll have some grenades and mines by the time they start showing up – generally towards the end of the round




create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

Welcome again to our delvings into the inner workings of the gaming world. Within these pages you'll find People, Places, Things in which we talk to Insomniac founder and CEO Ted Price (p130) about what inspired him to form the *Ratchet & Clank* studio. On p132 we take a trip to *Borderlands'* Pandora to discuss what that world's redneck charm brought to the game, and on p134 strap on *Just Cause 2*'s grappling hook to soar above games that make you travel in something so prosaic as a car. This issue's Studio Profile (p136) takes us to the coast, to Brighton, on a tour of *Buzz!* developer Relentless to find out where it's taking its all-conquering brand of quiz-game innovation next. The Making Of... brings us the landmark zombie terror of *Left 4 Dead* (p140), Turtle Rock/Valve's co-op survival horror game that has a few tricks up its ragged sleeve. Then, in Beyond Unreal (p144), we take a look at the state of modern 3D engines and consider Epic's dominance in a field also comprising the likes of CryEngine, while taking time to consider the future for studios committed to building their own solutions. Also in this issue we welcome a new columnist in Tadhg Kelly (p150), who's setting out to get to grips with what games truly represent, and who joins our existing band of contributors Clint Hocking (p152) of LucasArts, Randy Smith (p154) of indie developer Tiger Style, and BAFTA-winning writer James Leach (p156).



bit.ly/jT6wkn
The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



On p144 we talk to experts to discuss the current state of play in 3D game engines, taking in the approach of Epic, which recently revealved its 'next-generation' Samaritan demo

People

TED PRICE

How Insomniac's boss learned to switch off his obsession with being hands-on



Price, 17 years after founding Insomniac Games, is a 43-year-old father of four who loves to play videogames with his kids. His passion for games shines through in the company's culture

CV

URL www.insomniacgames.com
Softography *Disruptor, Spyro The Dragon, Spyro 2: Ripto's Rage!, Spyro: Year Of The Dragon, Ratchet & Clank, Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando, Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal, Ratchet: Deadlocked, Resistance: Fall Of Man, Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools Of Destruction, Ratchet & Clank Future: Quest For Booty, Resistance 2, Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack In Time, Overstrike* (below)



Insomniac Games founder and CEO **Ted Price** had precisely zero game industry experience behind him when he set up shop 17 years ago. That handicap obviously hasn't stopped his company from finding success, spawning hit series such as *Ratchet & Clank* and *Resistance*, both of which have new instalments arriving this autumn. Oddly, he was working as the financial controller of a medical company startup when it occurred to him it might be a good time to switch into a different business – one closer to his heart.

The life blood circulating through Insomniac reflects the passion that inspired its founder to boldly shake up his career. Insomniac has been named one of California's best places to work multiple times in recent years by Employers Group surveys. When we spoke to someone who works for him at E3 this year, the employee – himself an industry veteran – said Price was "the first guy I worked for who really cares".

"I had always been interested in gaming," Price says of his beginnings. "I was playing a lot of *Doom*, actually, and in 1993, when the 3DO was announced, I realised that there was an opportunity to get into console gaming in a much more financially efficient way."

Emboldened by the cost benefits offered by the transition from pricey cartridges to more feasible CD-ROM formats, Price joined up with Al Hastings – now the studio's chief architect – and together they led the creation of a demo for *Disruptor*, a design that capitalised on the popularity of *Doom* and similar firstperson shooters at the time. The summer of 1994 found the pair shopping *Disruptor* up and down the west coast of the US looking for a deal.

They found that deal with Universal Interactive Studios, joined by Al's brother, Brian Hastings, who would become the studio's chief creative officer. Then they were on their way to a nearly two-decades-old studio with happy staff, a distinctive style and a pedigree for creative games. Easy, right?

Price, as personable and warm as his reputation suggests, certainly makes it look that way. "It was all guesses, really," he laughs. "I think being a hardcore gamer from the age of six helped, because I'd been playing games all my life. So had Al and Brian. We knew what we liked, and we wanted to emulate our favourites."

Still, he admits that the studio made "plenty of mistakes" out of the gate. "We completely blew the first official milestone we had," he recalls. "That was the point at which we decided we needed a lot more help, in terms of realising what great game design was."

From there, Price and company got some help from Mark Cerny and Michael John. "I learned a hell of a lot about production and design from Mark," remembers Price. "With his help and with Michael's assistance on the levels, we were able to get *Disruptor* out the door and establish our own identity in terms of design. They helped us to figure out what we liked, and how to do it in a very Insomniac way."

Disruptor, which added psychokinetic powers to the firstperson tradition, hinted at the weapons innovation that would become the studio's hallmark, later seen in *Spyro*'s diverse breath weapons and *Ratchet & Clank*'s wild gadgetry.

"I never thought about this before, but that was really the start of it all. That's carried through almost all of our games, although our tone has varied," Price reflects. "*Ratchet* – which was our attempt to take the platform genre in a different direction – was where, I think, we hit our stride in terms of what we love to do."

Price says the studio, now about 220 developers strong, has maintained its distinctive identity for a long time. Indeed, Insomniac's voice is evident in the E3 reveal of its newest title, fourplayer co-op blaster *Overstrike*, which is the studio's first multiplatform game after years of Sony exclusivity (that relationship remains strong, he's careful to emphasise).

"We've adhered to the same cultural principles for the past 17 years," Price says. "Our goal is to make sure that everyone has a creative voice that gets heard. We want people to speak up about what they like and how we can make the studio better. The knowledge that you're not going to be ignored, I think, helps create this unique place."

> "The knowledge that you're not going to be ignored, I think, helps create this unique place"

Why, then, is a hands-on executive like Price viewed as such a rarity? "I don't think what I do is any different to what a head of a small or medium-sized developer would do," he counters. "If you talk to any development CEO who started a company because he loves games, I think it's odd if he or she becomes disassociated. It's what we do; it's why I got into the games business."

Although countless developers may wish that their executive leadership had Price's level of passion and interest, he admits that there can be a downside to his enthusiasm for hands-on involvement: a "hefty bottleneck" when he's tried to take on too many roles at once.

"When it came time to make decisions on the games, everything would grind to a halt if I was busy on something else, and that wasn't a great situation," Price concedes. "A lot of people told me: 'You've got to back off this, because we can't get our job done', so I backed off. I had to give up creative ownership of design and, as a result, I believe our projects have got better."

"The teams can be more nimble and get things done without having to worry about what I'm going to say," he adds. "And for me, it's fun because I get to watch people enjoying themselves. I will say we don't design by committee… Sometimes it's a tough line to walk. You want people to have their say and, at the same time, you want to come to decisions."

This year the studio showed two titles at E3, *Overstrike* and *Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One*, and that's gratifying for Price: "We have a very strong community these days, and having that direct connection with the community is great, because it justifies all the hard work and passion and stress that goes into making these games."

It was sheer passion that led the amiable, inclusive Price to found a decidedly unique studio at the age of 26, and now, as a 43-year-old father of four, he still radiates this quality. "On the weekends, I think my kids would like us to play non-stop," he laughs. "We are playing all the time. For me, it's awesome to still be pursuing that part of it, that passion.

"I know it sounds goofy, but my closest acquaintances in life are at Insomniac and have always been there. I love getting together with people and creatively solving problems – that's what gamers do." ■

Places

PANDORA

Borderlands' world might've left us bored, if not for a dash of redneck charm



Critters known as Skags pick through garbage when not trying to sink their teeth into you. They're the junkyard dogs of Pandora's endless scrapheap

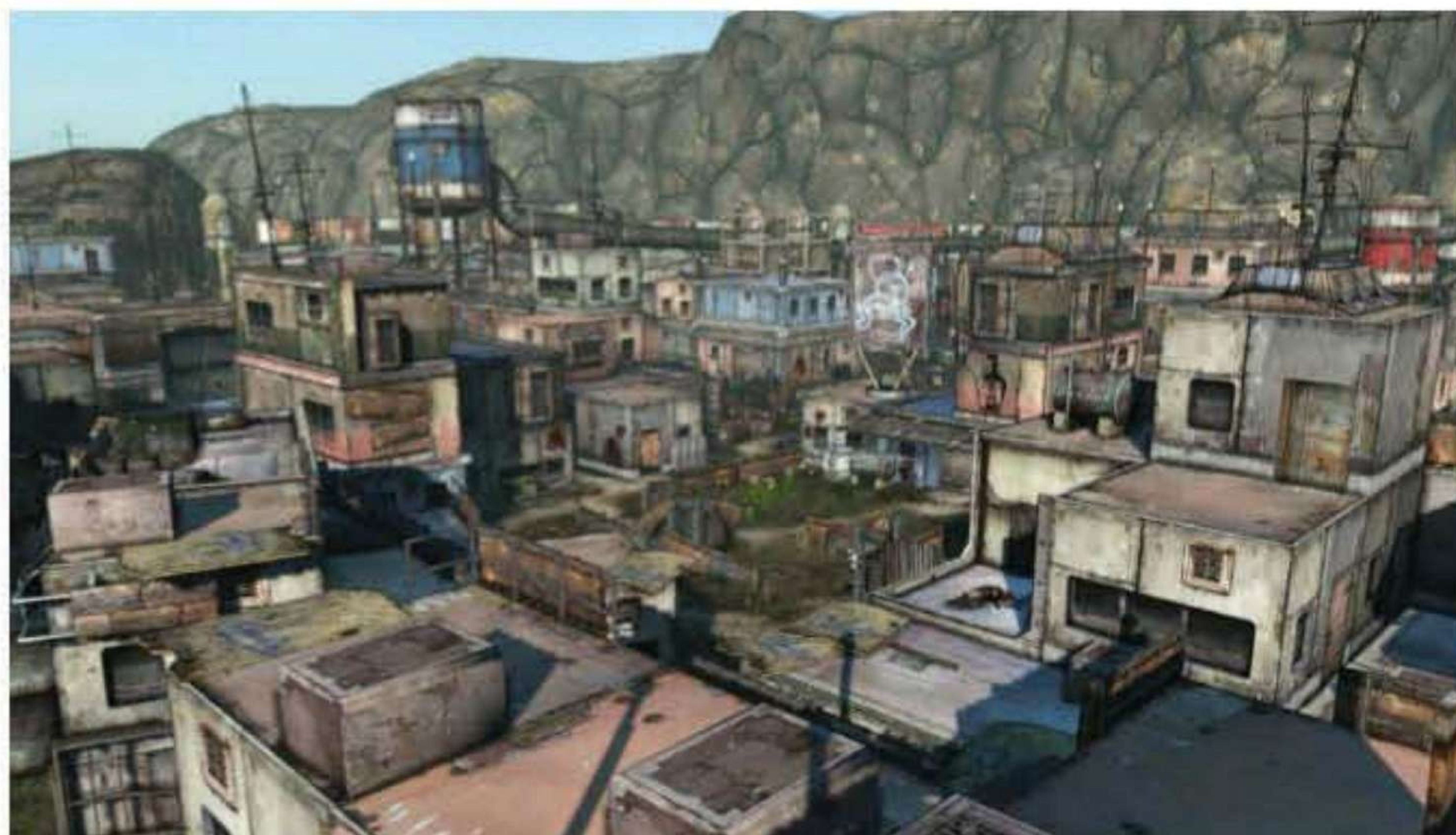
From Borderlands
Developer Gearbox Software
Origin US
Release 2009

The guns – all 17 million of them – may be the most obvious draw, but it's the setting of Pandora that ultimately saves *Borderlands* from a life spent aping *Halo*. The planet's as craggy and hostile as any Forerunner ring-world, but it's built to serve humour rather than dry, rattling grandeur, and its dramas are personal, for the most part, rather than apocalyptic. A plot swerve may pitch you towards saving the universe as usual, but you still leave feeling short-changed rather than noble. Ultimately, even this fact comes down to Pandora, whose narrative twist stems from hillbilly craftiness rather than ancient-prophecy-anointed champions.

Pandora is arid, ramshackle and only faintly fantastical. If this is science fiction, it's of the TV show variety rather than the big screen – the kind of fraying melodrama that's tugged together by a tiny crew working with puppets in a quarry. The backstory, however, legitimises most of the rough edges: Pandora's a place where nobody would choose to live, where much of the fauna has either sprouted teeth or sharp spines. *Halo* dropped you into a misty world of pine trees and green grass; *Borderlands* invites you to enjoy the sagging stalk of a giant sunflower that's grown monstrous beneath a busted sewage pipe. This is a planet where everything's been crated in by a network of rival mega-corporations – a neat justification for some bold asset reuse – and the only reason to stick around is a legend of an alien vault housing unspeakable riches.

The legend has attracted the most recent – and most deranged – settlers, and gives your trip to Pandora what little structure it has, too. Over time, the Mad Max wastelands give way to isolated moments of widescreen grandeur, but even then, amongst the corroded alien temples and bleached Godzilla rib cages, the white-trash tang hangs in the air. An ancient sea bed contains a drab roadside amusement known as the World's Largest Bullet – the kind of thing that may well have a real-world counterpart somewhere along the highways of Nebraska or North Dakota – and the pillars rising in the distance by the Lockdown Palace (typically, it's actually a prison) aren't the limbs of a crumbled temple, but concrete spars that once supported a dusty two-lane highway.

These reminders of humanity hold Pandora together, allowing the game to support the odd dead-beat flight of fancy such as the Salt Flats' massive, rusting digging machines; the windmill fields surrounding Zephyr Substation; or Jakobs Cove, a spooky corporate workers' town locked in a perpetual Halloween dusk and menaced by pumpkin-headed mutants. More poignantly, it's also these kinds of details that would never have come to the surface at all without a desperate last-minute change of art direction. The most astonishing fact about *Borderlands* is that its knockabout personality only emerged once the game was in the final quarter of its production run, and the team, according to a GDC post-mortem, realised it had to step beyond a constrictive style sheet based around the words 'gritty', 'serious' and 'mechanical', ultimately leaving the so-called 'Brown Period' behind.



***Borderlands*' limited array of assets is perfectly suited to being jumbled together to create vistas of mass-produced dereliction**

Pandora's a place where nobody would choose to live, where much of the fauna has teeth or spines

Early promotional videos make the point rather brutally: Gearbox may have conceived *Borderlands* with the same concepts, characters, and bestiary, but without its cross-hatched mountains, graphic-novel colour scheme and scribble-pocked metalwork, it might as well have headed to the shops wearing camouflage. The freedom to add actual pen strokes to rocks and cliff faces may not seem like a particularly meaningful or promising shift in visual design, but with it, presumably, came the freedom to accentuate little details, such as the villainous Sledge's Viking-horned welding mask. With it came the freedom to shake the boring deadwood out of the game's skill trees, and to broaden the shoulders of Brick, the tank class, before squashing his head down into his gigantic neck. It provided the freedom, in other words, to acknowledge that a game didn't have to be totally serious about its storyline and sense of place in order to be serious about its blasting.

And yet, if *Borderlands* isn't exactly serious, it can be uncommonly believable at times. Locations like Piss Wash Gully or The Middle of Nowhere really sound like they were named by bored, dispirited off-worlders. NPCs live in tents and lean-tos that seem convincingly cluttered and untidy – even if there is always ammo or cash in the toilet bowl. Bandit camp walls are cobbled together from freight containers, and the tired old coach that brings players into the adventure proves a far more convincing entry vehicle than a whole fleet of *Killzone 2* landing craft. There aren't a lot of shooters that insist on bussing you in: with *Borderlands*, it's entirely fitting.

Ultimately, Pandora helped to humanise a game that's about shooting things and looting their corpses, and brought with it some astonishing achievements: audio logs you'll actually listen to, quest givers you'll come to think of fondly even though they're barely animated and fixated on making you kill five of everything – except on the occasions when they'd rather you killed ten. Other titles may be prettier, more expensively produced, or more elegantly paced, but if you don't mind slumming it a little, *Borderlands* offers videogame tourism at its most charismatic. ■

Things

JUST CAUSE 2'S GRAPPLING HOOK

Why Scorpio's left arm might be gaming's most satisfying travel agent



The grappling hook is more than a means of scaling skyscrapers and breaking into moving helicopters for a fight – it enables you to interact with anything and everything you see

When playing Avalanche Studios' *Just Cause 2*, you'll often begin to ask: "I wonder if I can…" as you come to terms with the myriad uses of the game's all-powerful grappling hook. Usually, though, you'll trail off before completing the question, not entirely sure what it is you hope to accomplish. Regardless, the answer usually tends to be: "Yes. Yes, I can."

The first time might be during the high-speed chase towards the start of the game. Having just used the grappling hook to securely tether a car to a tractor to pull the former out of a ditch, you surf atop the car's roof as your NPC partner out-manoeuvres the army forces. "I wonder if I can…" you might begin to think before you tether the jeep to the ground itself. Moments later, the jeep jerks and flips, tail bar over windscreen, and you realise just what the small device strapped to Scorpio's arm is capable of.

"Yes. Yes, I can."

The antithesis of the stern-faced *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *Just Cause 2* embraces its absurdity boldly and unashamedly. The fictional, implausible Pacific dictatorship of Panau consists of 1,000 square kilometres of deserts, mountains, skyscrapers and a healthy scattering of explosive barrels. Avalanche has crafted a sandbox world of perfectly placed, volatile dominoes just waiting for you to bump one and trigger a series of fiery explosions.

The grappling hook's allure hinges on movement: an act so simple, so fundamental to games that we rarely stop to consider it. From videogames' earliest days, players have moved paddles to hit pixellated balls, typed "GO EAST" in text fields, vaulted over Piranha Plants and dove into green pipes. Freedom to move is freedom to play. From the very start of *Just Cause 2*, all of Panau Island is accessible and the game encourages you to go anywhere you wish and do anything you desire.

But Scorpio, the elite secret agent and playable character of *Just Cause 2*, isn't the focus of this world. He's a mere prosthetic on whom the true star of the show resides: the grappling hook. With the tap of a shoulder button you can pull yourself up the side of a skyscraper, leap from car roof to car roof, rip a gunner out of a helicopter then pull yourself up to tussle with the pilot or tether an enemy to a fuel canister and launch him into the sky with a single bullet. Panau is a blank cheque; the grappling hook is your pen.



Panau Island's fantastical and varied terrain provides the perfect playground in which to master *Just Cause 2*'s grappling hook

Although Avalanche first noted the grappling hook's promise when it appeared in *Just Cause* as a gadget to be equipped the same as any other weapon, it was the sequel that finally embraced its true potential. "In *Just Cause 2* we obviously gave the grappling hook and parachute more central roles in the gameplay," says Avalanche founder and *Just Cause 2* creative director **Christofer Sundberg**. "They have, together with the epic game world, become signature features of *Just Cause*."

> Through plenty of practice and experimentation, the grappling hook allows you to master space

Few gadgets from gaming history give a greater sense of unbridled movement than the grappling hook. From *Worms'* ninja rope to *Gravity Hook HD*'s namesake to its recent cameo in indie *Minecraft*-esque *Terraria*, it doesn't grant you instant dominance over the game area the way a jetpack or portal gun may, but through practice and experimentation it allows you to master space. It's rarely easy, but master the grappling hook and you master movement; master movement and you master the game.

Just Cause 2's grappling hook is more capable than most. Any surface, object or being can be interacted with in some way using it. "We got frustrated when we had to have 'grappling points' in the world, so we decided to give it some extra work and make sure all of it could be interacted with," says Sundberg. "We wanted to develop a grappling hook that worked as you want it to work: on everything and on everyone."

Despite the item's versatility, the game offers little in the way of training. Instead, to master the grappling hook you must experiment with the game's many intertwined systems. "We didn't consciously decide to let the player figure that stuff out themselves," Sundberg admits. "They've discovered more than we could ever imagine. A lot of functionality of the grappling hook was discovered during the actual development, and not designed from the beginning – just the way game development should be."

A prime example is how the grappling hook can be combined with Scorpio's parachute. Grapple the ground ahead of you and, while being pulled forward, open the parachute to soar above the trees. Then use the grappling hook to occasionally anchor yourself to the ground and pick up more speed – the experience is one part paragliding to one part rowing a boat. It's a trick that the game never explicitly teaches (although the Achievements hint at it), but once mastered you'll rarely use a land vehicle again.

"I think we're clearly the regent in the grappling hook space," says Sundberg. It's a modest statement. No other grappling hook – arguably, no other single gadget – has ever afforded the player so many possibilities. Not by stockpiling experience points or unlocking abilities but merely by learning what you have in relation to everything around you, Panau Island's highest mountains, widest oceans and most secure outposts are yours for the taking.

"I think we've set some kind of industry standard for grappling hooks." ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Relentless Software

Which mild-mannered British developer has sold over £325 million worth of games? Buzz if you know the answer







1 Buzz looks like he belongs on TV rather than inside a PS2, which helped Relentless's IP gain massmarket attention
2 *Quiz Climber*'s art style is something of a departure for the studio, which is far more associated with caricatures. It's a great fit for iOS devices, however, and complements Chillingo's house style well
3 The *Blue Toad Murder Files* has sold 250,000 episodes via PSN – not bad for an experiment in self-publishing



Founded 2003
Employees 50
Key staff Andrew Eades (chief executive officer), David Amor (chief creative officer), Helen Moore (chief financial officer), Stuart Dodman (operations director), Caspar Field (executive producer), Paul Woodbridge (design director), Bruce Heather (technical director), Paul Brooke (R&D director)
URL www.relentless.co.uk
Selected softography *DJ: Decks & FX, Buzz!: The Music Quiz, Buzz!: The Big Quiz, Buzz!: The Schools Quiz, Buzz!: The Master Quiz, Blue Toad Murder Files*
Current projects *Quiz Climber, Music In Motion*

One of the more enduring myths of the videogame industry is that true creativity can only be found thriving in chaos. It's not a view that **Andrew Eades**, the CEO of Brighton-based Relentless Software, has much time for.

"You can be creative without making a mess," he argues. "You just need to apply simple principles. If you look at bestselling authors, a lot of them have a very rigid schedule. They get up at 4am, they write for two hours, they do some press-ups, and then they write for another two hours. Roald Dahl had a clockwork schedule, and was a genius. I don't believe creativity equals chaos."

Neither does his business partner, David Amor. Back in 2003, the duo set out to build a tidy studio that worked with a quiet efficiency, with the goal of making videogames aimed at everyone. The best part of a decade later, and with £325 million in sales behind them, it seems that the plan may have worked.

The concept was relatively simple. "When we started Relentless, we asked ourselves what kind of studio we wanted," remembers Eades, sitting in the company's suspiciously uncluttered offices on a chill June afternoon. "When we counted, we discovered that 20-odd UK studios had gone bust in the previous year. We realised the old way didn't work, so we'd have to try something new. We decided to try a 9am start, and try working really hard for a 35-hour week, and restricting everyone's access to the Internet. We're not a clock-watching company, but it's about respecting the lives people have outside of work."



The main strength of new Relentless game *Quiz Climber* lies in its simplicity: it's a leaderboard scramble, pure and simple

If there's a slight tinge of puritan zeal to the Relentless ethos – this is one of the few developers you'll ever visit where the desks aren't littered with brightly coloured action figures and Battlestar Galactica posters – it's probably because Eades and Amor had both seen the other side of the industry when they were employed at Computer Artworks, the studio behind the videogame sequel to *The Thing*. "I was project managing and working as a lead programmer, and David was producing and running the whole studio back then, and the problems we had weren't specific to Computer Artworks in any way," says Eades. "In fact, it was the same old, same old: work late nights, eat pizza, and then come in late the next morning. It's a negative feedback cycle. And when a project's in trouble, the first reaction's always to get the weekend rota out. That's not the way to fix the fundamental issues, even though we had this very creative, very chaotic environment."

With milestones being missed and payments being delayed, chaos certainly wasn't working for Computer Artworks, and the company finally went under in 2003, leaving Eaves and Amor with the bare bones of a PS2 music game entitled *DJ: Decks & FX*. Fortunately, it was a project that Sony was interested in, and so, with the publisher's help, Relentless was born.

"People were quite sneery at the time because Buzz! was just a quiz game, but a lot of work went into it"

Although the studio resides in the heart of Brighton, a place with a reputation for laid-back creativity, it's been shaped with a clear-headed pragmatism, and Eades admits that the reason the team initially focused on music games was because they believed they had the strongest crossover potential for a mainstream audience. "We were always looking at things like *PaRappa The Rapper* and *Rez* as games that were inspiring but which you could also bring non-gamers to," he says, "so music seemed the most obvious thing for us to tackle." After shipping *DJ* and working on the EyeToy title *Groove*, however, Sony approached Relentless with a proposal that would move it out of its comfort zone.

"Sony had been given the rights to use 1,000 clips of music from the MCPS, the Mechanical Copyright Protection Society," says Eades. "They had this deal, and they were wondering what to do with all this music. They asked if we had any ideas, and that's when we switched from music games to quiz games, via *Buzz!: The Music Quiz*. *DJ* wasn't very successful, and *Buzz!* ended up doing almost two million sales." He laughs. "After that, we ended up doing quite a lot of *Buzz!*"

It's easy to forget what a striking prospect *Buzz!* was back in 2005, while the ease with which the simple TV show setup draws players in can mask the complexity of what the small south coast team developed. "The first *Buzz!* was pretty innovative," argues Eades. "People were quite sneery at the time because it was just a quiz game, but there was a lot of work that went into it. We designed our own controllers for it, we wanted four players working out of the box, and that had never been done before in the way that we did it. Also, until the very last minute, it would have been the first game Sony ever shipped that didn't have a singleplayer mode. We had to cram one in at the end. Later on we were the first PlayStation game with Trophies, the first console game ever to support Facebook Connect, and we were pretty early on with playable user-generated content."

Ultimately, though, Relentless wanted to be more than just the home of *Buzz!* – and the founders wanted the studio to be more than just a single-platform production line, too. "We've never been owned by Sony, but they helped set us up, and we were exclusive to them," Eades remembers. "It was a bit of a halfway house. You're neither fully internal, so you can't take part





Relentless's canteen (left) offers some great views of Brighton (and surprisingly squeaky chairs). The studio is unlike many others in terms of its staff makeup. "We don't have many *WOW* players here," says Amor, which perhaps explains the Little Riddle of *Blue Toad* (above)

in some of the bigger discussions, and you're not fully external either, so you can't work with anyone else." In 2010, with a gateway coming up in the studio's exclusivity contract, Relentless started working on a plan – a typically cautious, sensible sort of plan – to change its focus.

"We've gone through a restructure over the last few years," explains Eades, looking back on a bumpy 18 months. "We knew we wanted to try self-publishing, we knew there was a wider world out there. We were also very aware that we'd become 'the guys who made *Buzz!*', and that was all we were known for. We needed to prove that there was more to us." The solution came in the form of an amendment to the studio's contract with Sony, which allowed it to self-publish a PSN title.

That title turned out to be *Blue Toad Murder Files*, a bucolic and distinctly English episodic puzzle game series, set around an outbreak of murder in a sleepy rural village. Despite being delivered with the muppety charm and Sunday TV stylings that Relentless had brought to *Buzz!*, *Blue Toad* received a mixed reception from critics, but it's gone on to sell steadily over time, and has provided the studio with the confidence it needed to push forward and branch out.

"We'd become 'the guys who made Buzz!', and we needed to prove that there was more to us"

At this year's E3, the fruits of Relentless's recent work with Microsoft were unveiled in the form of *Music In Motion*, a stylish sound toy addition to the Kinect Fun Labs suite. At the same time, the studio's gearing up for the release of *Quiz Climber*, an ingeniously simple general knowledge game that also represents the team's first step on to yet another platform: iPhone.

"We initially thought we were burned out on quiz games," admits Eades. "We'd taken a break from *Buzz!* and were coming up with new ideas, and then David said: 'What if we make it really simple?' We decided to get a load of questions, rank them for difficulty, and ask people a harder one each time, like Millionaire. Then we take all the telemetry, re-rank the questions, and add in new questions to keep it topical. We gave one engineer two weeks to mock it up – it was a password-protected Facebook game as a prototype – and then we started testing it out. The idea is really straightforward: how many questions can you answer, and how high can you climb up the *Quiz Climber* tree compared to your friends?"

Quiz Climber is headed to iOS as a free, ad-funded download, with microtransaction support allowing players to buy lifelines. It's a model that Eades admits is a bit of an experiment, and it's presumably quite frightening for a developer used to shipping console games to suddenly find itself in the App Store.

"I don't know how the iOS market works yet," Eades says. "I *think* it works by partnering with the best. We showed it to Chillingo, and they signed it up within 24 hours. They've been giving us great advice on how to polish it, and the art style fits with their portfolio. After all, we're trying to appeal to *their* customers."

It's this down-to-earth quality, this quiet lack of presumption, that has defined much of the studio's output, and which suggests that, for a console developer, Relentless may be surprisingly well suited to life in the harsh, penny-pinching marketplace that has grown up around iOS. "Our team size on *Quiz Climber* was just a dozen people," argues Eades when asked about the economics of turning to Apple's platform after years making PlayStation titles. "It's probably about the same size as a lot of the other App Store teams – but those 12 people have five years' experience making quiz games for us. There's a lot of iPhone chat about throwing mud at the wall and seeing what sticks. I'm not sure that's the best way to create hits. We have to hope we can find hits with our experience. That's why we're using a quiz structure. We know quiz, we've done a lot of thinking about it, and we've got a lot of tools built to support it."

Despite its current lineup of projects, Relentless hasn't emerged completely unscathed from the economic woes that continue to batter the UK development scene, and which have recently seen Black Rock Studio, another Brighton-based console developer, hit with mass redundancies. "In February and March of 2010 we'd just gone non-exclusive with Sony, and that was just as the credit crunch was starting to hurt," says Eades. "Then, at the end of 2010, we lost a contract with Disney, and so our transition from Sony exclusive to fully independent, multiplatform, multi-product developer had a bit of a hiccup. All of a sudden, we had to act fast to reduce the impact that had. That did mean that more people lost their jobs faster than we anticipated, but we've come back as a leaner, faster operation than we were before, and we're growing again now."

Relentless has tried to learn from it all. "Every studio has headcount cuts, and what we've tried to do is reduce our core operational staff to around 50, and then contract lots of freelancers to help us build up to a larger outfit," says Eades. "We've decided to build a company that's capable of rapid changes in size, up or down."

While the times when Relentless could rely on an annual *Buzz!* game may be behind it, the studio is eager to explore the potential of new platforms and fresh business models. Walk its hallways today, and the developer's offices exude the same atmosphere they have for the past five years – that of a friendly, studious company, devoted to making accessible, social games. With two projects unveiled, and a new deal freshly inked with PlayJam to provide content for the new Samsung TV portal, Relentless may soon be busier than ever. "The future's really still about what we started out to do: to make games for everyone," says Eades. "Now, more than at any other point I can remember, with the place the consoles are at and with phones that play games in everyone's pockets, it's apparent that we can have a successful strategy with that." ■

Q&A

Andrew Eades
CEO and co-founder,
Relentless Software



With *Blue Toad Murder Files*, Relentless moved away from the simple quiz format that defined *Buzz!* That's not to say the two games are entirely unrelated, however.

How did you settle on the whodunit formula?
With *Buzz!*, we always reference Trivial Pursuit: as a family, you bring it out every Christmas, and that was *Buzz!* to us. When we imagined people opening the first *Buzz!*, we always pictured it at Christmas with all the family gathered around. The whole living room social aspect of everything we do always comes down to that memory about playing games like Monopoly with your friends. The actual game mechanic of Monopoly is not that brilliant, but the social aspect is more fun. So when it came to the next game, I was wondering how we could accidentally strike gold again. At that time, I read an article about Trivial Pursuit being 25 years old. I thought, 'Christ, that's been in the shops for 25 years. I wonder what's next to it?' I went down to WHSmiths, and sitting next to it was Cluedo. I went to Argos and got the catalogue, looked at the boardgame section, and then anything in there that I recognised as something I'd played with my family when I was young became a target for us. Cluedo resonated with the murder mystery genre, which still seemed to be popular, so we decided to explore that first.

Were you afraid you'd taken on too much?
The episodic thing was simple. We realised that, since it was download only, we couldn't give the whole game away for free. Also, it's a murder mystery; everybody understands the metaphor of watching an episode of a murder mystery every week, and we wanted to echo that narrative. When you watch Miss Marple, even though it's not interactive, you still do interact with it, guessing and trying to solve things. When we were trying to work out how to make it truly interactive, before we'd even noticed *Professor Layton* – and it was a real shame when we did notice *Professor Layton* – what we noticed about Cluedo was that it's not really a murder mystery at all: it's a logic puzzle game. That made everything a lot simpler.

What did you learn from the experience?
I think people genuinely like *Blue Toad*. They see where we hit the mark and where we missed a bit. It was a good 'difficult second album' experience for us. The whole episodic thing is really difficult to crack. Telltale Games were very helpful and open with us in terms of telling us how they structure their business in that regard, but the real reason we went episodic was because we were trying to find out about price points, and what people think represents value for money. We took the view that we could drop the price over time, but it would be hard to increase it. That's not the same on iPhone, perhaps, but it's certainly true on PSN. Over time, the price erodes, and you can catch new people as it does. It's worked for us, though: we're 18 months into the lifecycle of *Blue Toad* and we're still selling a lot of episodes every week.





Brighton's dev scene still buzzes, and down the road from Relentless HQ (above) you'll find Black Rock Studio, admittedly now in condensed form

THE MAKING OF…

Left 4 Dead

Valve's co-op take on undead horror redefined online play and scared us witless. Not bad for an apocalypse with just 30 zombies



Turtle Rock's early concept art for the infected includes the Screamer, an escaped asylum inmate. The original Boomer was a walking bomb, and the Hulk (far right) later became the Tank

Format 360, PC
Publisher Valve
Developer Valve/Turtle Rock Studios
Origin US
Release 2008

Chet Faliszek knows more about the living dead than is healthy. In October 2008, a month before the launch of Valve's zombie-horror game *Left 4 Dead*, the writer was standing in a supermarket ice-cream aisle when a girl came running over and enlisted his help in settling an argument with her boyfriend.

"Hey, mister," she asked without a flicker of embarrassment. "Can zombies swim or not?" Faliszek, Valve's resident undead expert, stroked his beard and offered an extensive insight into the aquatic abilities of ambulatory corpses. "She was horrified by the depth and detail of my answer," he laughs.

Everyone gets zombies: they're dead or infected, they shamble or charge, and they want to eat your brains. Human nature is rather more slippery. When the *L4D* team began running external playtests for its horror shooter, it was shocked by what players got up to.

"It was kind of like watching a lab rat experiment," recalls **Mike Booth**, then CEO of Turtle Rock Studios, where *L4D* originated. "Some people would declare themselves the leader and bark instructions, whether they were qualified to or not. Other guys just wanted to help out and make sure everyone had health kits. A few would just wait for the moment to stab you in the back."

The procedural population system constantly adds and removes zombies behind your back

Ask Valve staff about their favourite playtest moments and the stories come thick and fast. There were the LAPD cops who arrived in full-on bravado mode and were instantly turned into zombie chow. Then there was the time when four newbies spawned on the rooftop at the beginning of the No Mercy map and turned into lemmings.

"The first one just jumps off the roof and ledge hangs," remembers Faliszek. "The other three just inexplicably followed him. Why they would do that, I don't know. I think they thought the first one knew what they were doing so they followed. We decided to call that an outlying data point and just hoped it never happened again!"

Perhaps the most illuminating anecdote, though, is the one about the kid who brought his dad to play alongside two *Counter-Strike* pros. As the father failed badly, the kid began ignoring him – but the veterans ushered him through.

"They protected him – they went back for him when he trailed behind," remembers Faliszek. "In return, he was able to help them up when they were incapacitated. Watching that interaction between strangers and realising that it could happen in the game was one of those moments like: 'OK, this is going to work. We've really got something here'."



Turtle Rock founder Mike Booth (left) took his mod Terror Strike to Valve in 2004. Writer Chet Faliszek loved it: "We got to see it first as fans and we were instantly hooked"

Just like in the best zombie movies, the real drama in *L4D* lies in the relationships between the living, not the dead. The infected are just a pretext for collapsing the social order and forcing people to depend on one another to survive. It's the ultimate online co-op experience, a game that requires not just headshot skills but communication, collaboration and confidence in your fellow player.

***L4D* began in** the offices of Turtle Rock Studios in 2004, just after Valve's favourite Orange County developers had shipped *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero*. Terror Strike was a B-movie horror mod that saw a team of counter terrorists planting zombie bait on a night version of the CS: Italy map, then fending off an overwhelming horde of living dead. It was an incredibly intense experience.

When Booth showed the prototype to Faliszek and Erik Wolpaw, the Valve staffers couldn't stop playing it. Big deadheads, who'd worked on an unrealised online text game called *Zombie World* in the '90s, they instantly saw the appeal. "It captured the thing we always loved about the zombies," says Faliszek. "It's you and your buddies – its co-op, it's social, you're hanging out laughing and having fun and these horrible things are happening and coming at you."

By that afternoon, Valve's CEO Gabe Newell had heard about the prototype and offered Booth the assistance of Faliszek and Wolpaw in developing it further. It was a brilliant piece of co-op matchmaking, Turtle Rock's formidable AI skills combining with Valve's passion for storytelling (Valve eventually acquired Turtle Rock in January 2008).

Together, the two studios proceeded to thrash out where to take the prototype. "We realised we had this nugget of gameplay where a small co-operative group had to deal with hundreds of melee monsters," explains Booth, a veteran programmer with a passion for AI systems.

"We wanted certain things to happen at certain places, sort of the traditional scripting methods of having dramatic experiences. But we immediately ran into the fact that players are smart and they memorise all that stuff. We'd come from the background of *Counter-Strike* and we wanted to create something that was infinitely replayable."

What they set out to do over the next few years of constant playtesting and iteration was blend two seemingly opposed objectives: emergent, co-op gameplay and a dramatic interactive experience that would mimic the peaks and trough of a horror movie. Much like the living-yet-dead zombies, it seemed like an impossible mash-up. But if the dead could walk, was it possible to make a game that was emergent and yet structured at the same time?

No one forgets their first horde. They run towards you screeching like birds of prey, eyes flashing hatred, limbs flailing and teeth bared. "One of my favourite reactions, when people play *L4D* for the first time, is when they see that mob running at them from a distance," laughs Booth. "They're like: 'Oh my, here they come. Oh, oh, oh… OH MY GOD!'"

It's hard to believe, then, that *L4D* only ever has 30 zombies in the world at any one time. The game's procedural population system constantly adds and removes them behind your back to give the illusion of thousands of living dead.

Pulling the strings behind the scenes is the AI Director, an artificial intelligence system that's responsible for creating the highs and lows of the in-game drama. By controlling where and when zombies, mobs and special infected spawn, and by guiding the audio cues and weapon/item drops, the AI Director can modulate how the game responds to players' actions and abilities.

"We needed to make sure that certain tempos and pacing happened on a regular basis to keep people's excitement and attention going," explains Booth. "For *L4D* that was basically just me and some C++ code making that happen. In *L4D2* we generalised it into a larger tools framework."

This is how technologists approach the art of drama, a technique that marks the gulf between

storytelling in games as opposed to more traditional linear media. Monitoring players' actions and emotional responses – how agitated they seem, how accurate their shooting is, how well they are co-operating – the AI Director is able to form a strategy to respond to their experience. Forget Hollywood's three-act structure, this is something much more dynamic and flexible.

In fact, *L4D* could be the videogame equivalent of hooking up a horror movie audience to ECG machines and letting a filmmaker adjust scenes on the fly to drive them to the brink of a heart attack, then calm them down before unleashing the next onslaught. Imagine if Alfred Hitchcock – or better yet, schlockmeister William Castle, the canny, carny genius behind gimmicks like the vibrating auditorium seats that accompanied 1959's The Tingler – had access to that kind of interactive, realtime audience feedback.

The genius of *L4D* was that it took emergent narrative to the next level. No surprise, then, to discover that Valve's in-house psychologist Mike Ambinder has since been experimenting with new ways to tailor gameplay to players' emotional responses: monitoring facial expressions, testing alternative control methods (eyeball aiming, for instance) and developing techniques to measure players' physiological signals. In years to come, *L4D* may mark the beginnings of the ultimate horror videogame: one that uses biofeedback to delve into your subconscious and scare you witless.

Horror films were big in the Valve office. "One of the goals of *L4D*'s art direction, from day one, was to try and capture the feel of a horror movie," explains art director **Randy Lundeen**. "We ended up using a whole set of cinematic effects for our visual formula – colour-correction, film grain, vignette and local contrast. We also relied heavily on lighting to create a sense of an abandoned post-apocalyptic setting."

The chief inspiration was 28 Days Later. "That movie did such a great job of creating a creepy post-apocalyptic setting," Lundeen continues. "Their environments gave such a detailed background of the events happening outside of the main plot – abandoned vehicles, notes left by survivors, survivor holdout areas. We loved the idea that the setting could tell the story of what had happened before the players arrived."

Like the rest of *L4D*, the survivors went through a variety of iterations. "With the first set of designs, all three male characters looked like they came from the same place and could hang out at a bar," explain modeller **Miles Estes**. One of the biggest changes was Louis, who morphed from a hirsute, religious nutjob into a nine-to-five office

Q&A



Bronwen Grimes
Technical artist,
Valve

What kind of zombie research did you do?
We read a lot about real-life zombies, hosts whose parasites have changed their behaviour. Caterpillars that guard wasp larvae, ants that climb to the top of grass stalks specifically to get eaten, mice that find the smell of cats enticing.

Did it influence the way the game plays?
None of it particularly helped with the design process, but we couldn't help our curiosity! The parasite that makes mice seek out cats can actually infect human beings, too. It's suspected that in its latent phase, the parasite causes subtle personality changes. And you wouldn't know it was happening to you.

What do zombies tell us about ourselves?
As an artist, you can't help but identify a little with the monsters you're making. We don't always understand our own motivations, and don't always act for our own good. There's a lot of consciousness about how we've changed the planet, and a lot of worry about how those changes we've made might be changing us back. Zombies are a personification of those fears.

worker based on a buddy Faliszek and Wolpaw had back home in Cleveland. "I remember helping him move house," says Faliszek. "He dropped something, ruined it and still made a joke about it. That's the perfect guy you want in the zombie apocalypse."

One of *L4D's* best horror techniques is its clever use of anticipation, the sobbing of an unseen Witch, or the screech of a nearby Hunter scaring you before the monsters even appear. Yet for many players, the game's most terrifying enemies aren't the special infected but the zombie masses, the wanderers that populate each map.

Lying around, leaning against walls and vomiting, the ghouls initially appear harmless. "It's easy to identify with the zombies and say: 'Oh, they could be me'," explains Booth, who cites fears over a potential bird-flu pandemic in 2005 as an inspiration.

"We kind of pushed on that with the wandering infected, how they stumble around and vomit and just look like they're having the worst flu ever. We wanted that combination of pity and 'it could be me' with 'this is horrible' and then 'Oh my God, here they come, we have to survive'." Indeed, German censors were so appalled by the juxtaposition that they ordered the 'passive' animations cut. If a German player joins your online session, the zombies will stop lying down. They'll still try to kill you, though.

Ask Valve staff what they were most afraid of during the years the game was in development and the answer isn't zombies, or Boomers or even the Witch. It's the real-life players for whom they designed the experience. Back in 2005, online co-op was still such a new game mode that nobody was certain *L4D* would survive its encounter with the unpredictability of human behaviour. While the AI Director crafted the drama with scientific precision, it amounted to little if the game didn't encourage its players to invest in the fiction.

"We had no idea whether in the wild random people would go out of their way to let somebody out of a closet [the chosen respawn point for dead players in campaign mode]," admits Booth. "We really pushed the design of the game so that you wanted to have that extra gun and it worked."

In playtests, *Counter-Strike* veterans often found it hard to adapt to the game's strategies for forcing co-operation. "They would ignore their team and run off with just a pistol – 'I'm going to do the Rambo thing'," Faliszek groans. Of course, they were quickly pounced on by a Hunter, something that underlined the role of the Special Infected in promoting group cohesion. Boomers, Smokers, Hunters, the Witch and the Tank were all designed to break up the group – thereby forcing players to stick together more.

Cohesion was so important that when ideas were floated about the possibility of dead players joining the horde, the developers decided against it. "It's in the zombie canon: don't get bit or you'll turn," says Booth. "Honestly, there is a lot of really interesting gameplay fodder there. Like, if you knew you had been bitten and you're going to turn in five minutes, do you tell your team yet or not? Frankly, though, that's a different game." Faliszek agrees: "It's like in *Team Fortress* when you get team swap at a bad time and you get mad. We really wanted the survivors always to know that the person on their team was going to have their backs; they were working for them, working with them."

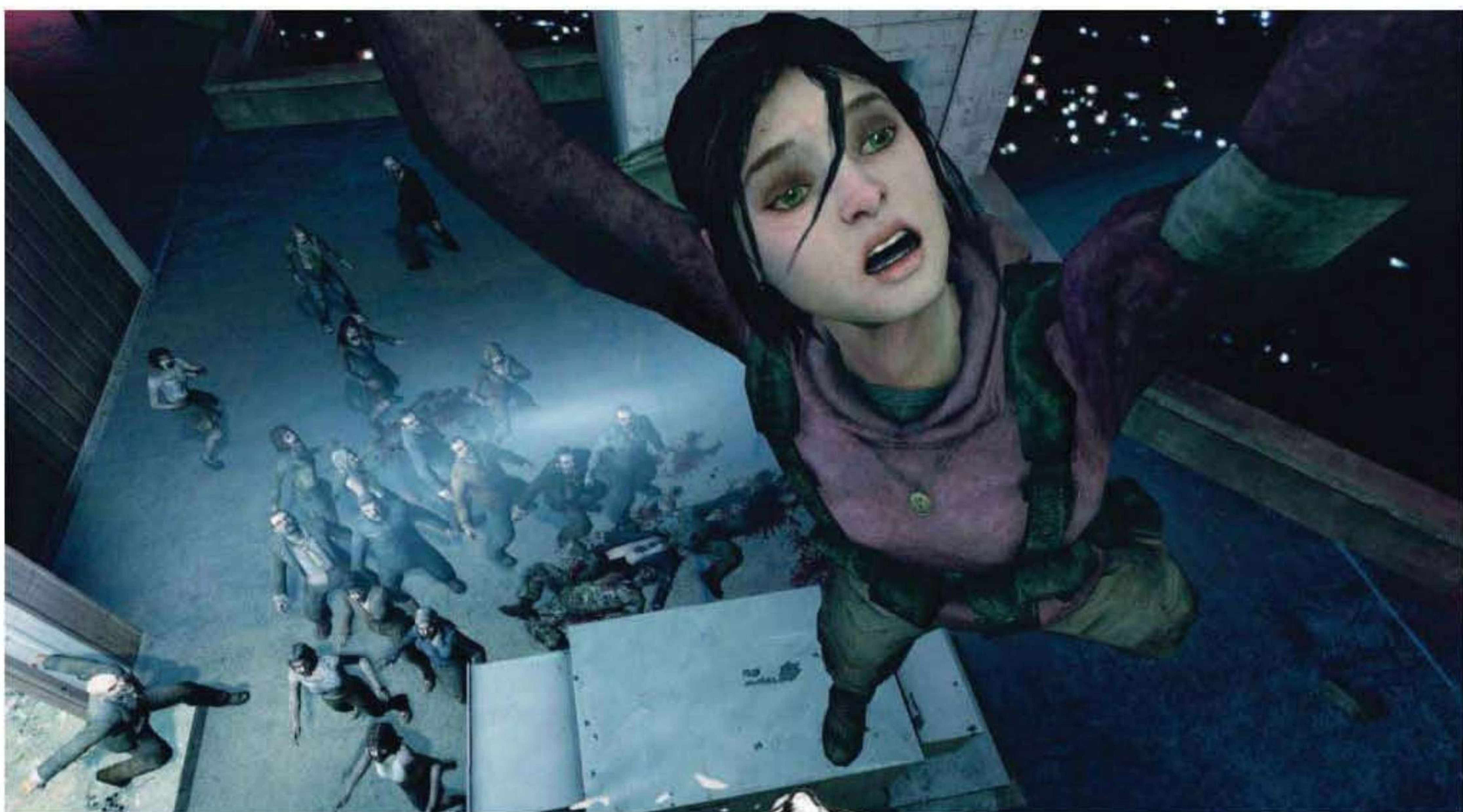
When the game was released in November 2008, the impact of the co-op approach was quickly felt. One surprise was the unprecedented number of female players who ventured into the traditionally testosterone-soaked world of the online shooter. "I think it's one of the first games where you're not just playing but being social, and helping each other in a very direct way that is meaningful," Booth suggests, then adds with a chuckle: "I'm proud that we've prepared future generations for a zombie apocalypse." ■







Zombie movie 28 Days Later (above) was a major inspiration for *L4D*'s atmosphere, although not its character art. The shot of Zoe hanging above the hordes (below) launched the press campaign



Scream and scream again

Even zombies can evolve. *L4D*'s Tank began life as a regular green zombie dubbed 'the Hulk'. The Boomer (right) was originally a walking bomb that could take out the entire team if they were standing too close when it went off. Then there was the Screamer, a cackling special infected that players had to chase and kill before he let rip with his trademark yelp.

"The Screamer was an escaped insane asylum patient in a straitjacket," modeller **Ariel Diaz** remembers. "If you let him alone he wouldn't bother you. However, if you aggravated him he'd scream and summon horde after horde to attack you until he was killed." Problem was, few players noticed him before he ran off.

Although cut from the finished game, the Screamer lives on: his horde-attracting abilities evolved into the Boomer's vomit attack, while his ear-piercing vocals are used to announce each horde wave during the finale events.





Beyond Unreal

The reign of the thirdparty engine has kept gaming up to speed, but is it turning into a stranglehold?



A contest winner on the Game Artist forums, this recreation of the world of Blade Runner was made by a three-man team in CryEngine 2's Sandbox world editor

When Starbreeze – product of the illustrious Nordic demoscene and as synonymous with in-house tech as IO, Avalanche or Remedy – says it's making games with Unreal, then these are unreal times indeed. Frightening times, maybe, for those who believe that all Unreal games "look the same", or that games such as *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* and *The Darkness* were defined as much by engine as by gameplay.

Is this how things are going nowadays? Was this past "generation of Unreal" just a prologue to an epoch of even greater uptake and homogeny? Are the days of the in-house engine numbered? And what the hell happened at Starbreeze, anyway?

"We got to a point where we realised we had two options: either we'd need to build our technology again from scratch, or go with something like Unreal," explains producer **Samuel Ranta-Eskola**. "We're a studio of around 50 people, and don't underestimate the cost of building our engine all over again. Think of an engine as like a house: you can keep building and building on top, but only so much before you have to change the foundations. And it's a recruitment thing, too. These engines are freely available, so you're hiring people that know immediately how to use them."

The departure of certain "key members" to form MachineGames, which today represents Bethesda in Sweden, has at the very least given Starbreeze some fresh competition at a time when Project Redlime, the worst-kept secret remake in gaming, is facing fresh delays. Ranta-Eskola assures us that it is still being made using the old Starbreeze tech, but after that the move will be made over to Epic's engine.



The term 'game engine' seems to be strangely insufficient when you consider that CryEngine 2 even powers interactive boardrooms in its partnership with Teesside University's DLAB

"There was some resistance from the programmers, naturally," he admits. "As you say, we'd built a reputation for using our own tech. It was a funny thing with *Riddick* [*Escape From Butcher Bay*], because with that we were out before *Doom 3*, and people were saying: 'Wow, you can do this on Xbox?' And now people are worried about the switch to Unreal, and that's understandable. But it's all about your artists, engineers and pipeline. We'll still be making Starbreeze games.

"It's surprising, actually, how similar Unreal is to our own tech. We haven't fully moved over to it yet, but I think we'll get up to speed with it very quickly indeed. And you can rest assured that if we do find something it can't do that stops us doing what we want to design, we'll do whatever's needed to fix that."

Matthew Karch, CEO of proprietary tech champion Saber Interactive, sympathises: "If you don't have the resources to do it, then going to an external solution makes sense. It's very possible – and I don't want to speak for Starbreeze – that there's a line. Avalanche is a good Swedish developer, DICE is in Sweden and Bethesda just opened there. So there's a lot of competition for talent. Maybe they decided not to spend their resources that way."

That's the thing about building your own engine: it's horrifically expensive in just about every way

Because that's the thing about building your own engine: it's horrifically expensive in just about every way. Not so much in Russia, though, where Saber – which is currently building both *Inversion*, a gravity-switching shooter for Namco, and the *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* remake for Microsoft – has its factory floor.

"To be perfectly honest, it's half as expensive to develop in Russia as Sweden," says Karch. "The cost of supporting that team size in Sweden is significantly higher, and on top of that, in Russia we just don't have that competition. Sweden has a lot of studios in a country of, what, eight million? Russia has very few developers and lots of talented tech people. It's an enabler."

In Britain, meanwhile, having just knocked it out of the gymkhana park with *Dirt 3*, Codemasters is just as happy sticking with its Ego engine, to the point that CTO **Bryan Marshall** can freely chat about next-gen follow-up Ego 2. "I guess the key bit is that we started out re-architecting the rendering systems and the pipeline," he says, "so we're going to get a lot

Hard stuff

When we spoke to Crytek's global business development manager **Carl Jones** recently, he heralded an age of increasingly PC-like hardware with some optimism. Tablets and smartphones, he observed, are already using that familiar combo of heavily programmable GPU and CPU to power increasingly competitive 3D games.

Marshall expects much the same, which is why Ego 2 is built for "evolution more than revolution," using the current state-of-the-art PC as a ballpark for next-gen architecture. But where does hardware such as PlayStation 3 sit in that picture? Would we be happier without it? "The technology-minded among us, they love new tech: new CPUs, new GPUs – anything that's a bit of a disruptor, and can create innovation and get everybody thinking. There's nothing wrong with that," says Marshall.

"From a pure game production point of view, though, if all you're worried about is getting something on screen and getting a particular game playing, then the generic is fine. But it's the hardware and the interface that are now just as important, especially if you look at the impact of Microsoft's Kinect and, massively, iPhone and iPad. These are more important than CPUs and GPUs."



Off-the-shelf engines mean off-the-shelf shaders, which some games (such as *Mass Effect*) customise more than others.

more objects and effects onscreen. We're going to put a lot more energy and effort into our character rendering, and lighting and shadows. All the things we're good at but want to keep pushing, and we're going to see a lot more from physics as well. Is there a particular platform in mind? No, because if you look at *Dirt 3* on the high-end PCs, it's definitely on that level, on the extreme GPUs. That's where we are at the moment."

There is an equilibrium, he agrees, behind enduring proprietary tech. Ranta-Eskola uses licensing as an example, telling us that for a studio of a certain size and output, "it can't just be about your own games any more." Codemasters agrees, but with a twist: it licenses Ego to itself. "Not in any mechanical process," says Marshall, "but we can share the cost across four or five games in production. A smaller team with one product out every two or three years is going to struggle, I guess."

None of this has really bothered consumers in the thrall of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Gears Of War*, *Mass Effect* and the dozens of chart-topping games made with Unreal this gen, however. In a multiplatform landscape ruled over by six-year-old hardware, the measured growth of Epic's engine feels like progress enough in itself. But if the deluge of sequels based on ageing tech at this year's E3 gives us pause, could their collective lack of substantial new ideas give us problems? When you consider how UE3 game *Mirror's Edge* broke its back trying something new, does the thirdparty engine deserve to take some of the blame?

"There are arguments for and against off-the-shelf engines," says Karch. "If what you're trying to do is make a straightforward shooter, using Unreal or CryEngine are great options. But if you're pushing the edge in one way or another, you're going to have to implement that feature and get it working before you can start experimenting with gameplay. With your own



Karch concedes the use of some middleware in *Inversion* (above): Havok's new destruction engine, which he considers to be far superior to that of CryEngine and its games

tech, you can get to that point a lot sooner and you have more parameters to play around with. I don't know if we would be able to do *Inversion* with Unreal.

"We could approximate it pretty closely, I think. One of things that we did was find a way to get the *Gears* assets and implement them in our engine. And you could tell the material differences were slight, but they were very similar. It's more about the other things, the game side of things. And rendering, right? Look at what the *Battlefield* guys are trying to do, that destruction. That's much easier to do with your own technology."

> "What we did on TimeShift was create multiple save games and play those back in reverse"

Games such as *Inversion* and Saber's earlier shooter *TimeShift* revolve, he reminds us, around an ambitious technical hook. And what's interesting about the latter is that it was published by Vivendi (now Activision) just as the eminently derivative *Singularity* was in development. Raven's time-shifting shooter was based on Unreal, furthermore, and its mechanic was primitive in comparison. "They had states for individual objects and you could reverse things back to those states," Karch points out, "but it wasn't a tech-intensive game mechanic.

"What we did on *TimeShift* was create multiple save games and then play those back in reverse while ignoring player data. So the player was moving forward while, at 24 frames per second, you had the whole world playing save-game scenes in reverse. Which was a pretty cool piece of technology, and having our own engine enabled us to do something unique with that. We didn't take it far enough, however, and hoped we could go on to do that with a sequel."



Kazuyuki Hashimoto
President,
Avatar Reality



Samuel Ranta-Eskola
Producer,
Starbreeze



Matthew Karch
CEO,
Saber Interactive



Epic's message for its June UDK update is that graphics akin to its *Samaritan* demo are possible – with time and manpower

Whether it's Unreal, Unity (which entered a three-year, multiplatform partnership with EA last year, adding to its alliance with Google) or CryEngine, the influence of an engine over the art and design of a game seems inevitable to some degree. Starbreeze disagrees, and says it wouldn't have chosen Unreal had this been the case. But few will argue that different engines are suited to different applications, and that choosing the right one is part of the equation.

Kazuyuki Hashimoto is a veteran of Square (prior to the Enix bit) and a former vice president of technology at EA. He worked on GScube, the Emotion Engine-powered hardware platform behind 2001 movie Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within – a project which, he reveals, contained a game engine intended for PS2.

He witnessed firsthand EA's purchase of Criterion and its attempt to roll out RenderWare to its internal studios – a move which, recalls Marshall, pulled the rug out from under Codemasters (which had all-but committed to RenderWare itself) and inspired the creation of

Neon, now Ego. "For us to even contemplate going down that route again, where perhaps another company could take away our future, is just unfathomable," says Marshall.

Today, Hashimoto is president of Avatar Reality, maker of the naturalistic online virtual world *Blue Mars*, and one of the few visible licensees of CryEngine 2. His reason for choosing Crytek's engine? "Total balance. Being at a technically high level is one thing, but that alone doesn't mean impressive quality. It's got to be something more.

"An engine can have all the leading shaders and technology, but fine-tuning is the key. Impressive quality is the channelling of all the knowledge of your workers into achieving the goal. Unreal is very tuned to darker environments, interiors, underground, but not nature.

"No engine is easy to use, though, especially CryEngine. It's very heavily tuned, and you need to understand all of the parameters and the inside technology. They built this engine for their firstperson shooting game; we're trying to use it for a virtual world. So we knew that a lot of customisation would be required. There aren't as many CE2 licencees, so the support is a lot more personal. We don't know how much documentation is available for Unreal, but yeah, it's more. But the real deep-level problems can't be described in documentation anyway, so the personal touch helps a lot. That's how you get solutions."



The launch of Crytek's SDK package this year should allow training in tools such as its Sandbox editor. But the engine maker will always have an advantage, believes Karch



***Mirror's Edge* remains one of the more unusual Unreal uses, although DICE has reverted to in-house tech with Frostbite 2.0**

Is the popularity of in-house tech under threat, we ask? "It depends on the project. If you have enough budget to build an engine within the development period, then people will do it. No engine can be properly generic – it has a target application. It's very difficult to fully optimise for every different purpose. EA tried to use RenderWare – which was purely designed as a game engine – but they needed it ready for every different purpose. So you need to have many branch handlers inside the game code, and that's expensive.

"In programming, especially at the lower level, that branch handling is a bottleneck. So if you're optimising for a certain type of game and quality, you're better off building something more straightforward. So the advantage [of in-house tech] is still there, but it takes time and resources. You need to gather expert programmers together. Larger games will still try to build their own engines for the sake of differentiation."

Things were extremely different years ago, he tells us. Programmers were stubborn, and they could afford to be. They liked to play God with code and, such was the landscape at the time, got away with doing so. Their attitude was part of the reason that the rollout of RenderWare stalled, he believes, but that was then. Nowadays, though, "Unreal and CryEngine are so powerful that many programmers just can't do that stuff, which is much of the reason why those engines are so popular."

Full circle

Pre-E3 leaks aside, Saber Interactive's commission to make *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* came as a surprise to just about everyone… except Saber Interactive. The company's tech is solid and versatile. Games such as *TimeShift* and *Inversion* happily trade blows with today's capable shooters, and revolve around technological hooks that set them apart. But why, many have asked, was this lesser-known, primarily Russian tech picked over, say, the *Reach* engine?

"I think the primary reason is that if you want to keep the gameplay exactly as it was, you need to use the actual *Halo* engine," says Karch. "So long as the original is being used, the renderer is less important; you could use any renderer you want as long as you're familiar with it and can tie the two together – whether it's *Reach* or even Frostbite, as long you can connect the logic of those two engines and make it look good.

"It's more about recreating the artwork and making it true to the original – and no one's more diligent about that than the 343 [Industries] guys. They're phenomenal."

Anniversary is one of those remakes that enables you to toggle between new and old graphics on the fly, as if to prove that the game is more than just a mere emulation of the original. In truth, however, both versions are being rendered by Saber3D – while Bungie's game logic runs underneath. "Is that possible with a thirdparty solution? It might be, but we were able to get it up and running in no time," says Karch.

The modular, future-proofed nature of Saber3D, furthermore, means that there are advanced graphical features included in *Anniversary* – and *Inversion*, for that matter – that are presently switched off. Is a PC version on the cards, an apology of sorts for the pilloried *Halo CE*? "It's not something that's happening at the moment, but I wouldn't be surprised if it did. One of the reasons Microsoft decided to work with us is because the tech was strong, and this game's a lot about execution. And as we work more with those guys we see a lot of opportunities, and I hope they do, too. We've had a lot of positive press. This is how remakes should be done. We've put as much effort into it as a full game."

And let's not forget the next generation, with its terrifying demands on artists, especially, demanding ever more sophisticated tools that are easier than ever to use. For those wanting to build that technology themselves and be ready to actually make some games, Marshall has some news about when, in development terms, next-gen gets underway. "About 18 months ago," he says. "That's how long we've been working on Ego 2. We've been trying to predict where we'll be, without having strong designs or anything to work to. It's about trying to be at the front while picking the best bits to get ready for the unknown." ■




Treat

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

We must own the language that's used to describe videogames

I decided to write a book. It was a book about the fundamentals of game design and how to approach it that had been brewing in my mind for a long time. As I started writing, I realised that my subject was actually deeper than that; I was writing about what games are, as a medium and an art, and trying to get at the heart of why they tick. I was on a mission.

Most of the conversations that I have with industry people are about process: what are we making, will it sell, how will we sell it, what's our strategy? Indie developers worry about nuts-and-bolts stuff just as much as massive multiplayer studios. The little app maker on the iPhone has just as many headaches as the bigwig at the finest Japanese publisher. Whether it's technical hitches, content strategies or revenue models, working in games is often a very ordinary place. It's spreadsheets, task lists, testing and accounting.

In those circumstances, it's pretty easy to get lost in the lesser things. We often forget that our art changes the world.

You might find that statement uncomfortable. You might say games are meant to be fun, that games are immature, or that games are a business and all that art talk doesn't really matter. You might cite *Flower*, Roger Ebert, BAFTA or the Game On exhibition, depending on your point of view.

It is difficult for many of us to say out loud that games are an art and game makers are artists. We feel foolish. We know next to nothing about art, and what we do seems to make players happy. Art is supposed to be serious, studied, academic, even pretentious – and that's not us. Or so we think.

Even those who do advocate for games as an art tend to deflect, saying that games are becoming an art, or capable of being an art one day when the technology becomes sophisticated enough. They sidestep, saying that games are like other arts, borrowing legitimacy from movies and television. So, whether directly or indirectly, we reinforce an identity imposed upon us. We say we are small. Little. Lesser. Geeks. Not worthy. Don't hurt us.

And we're stuck.

When we try to describe games and capture their magic we borrow terms like 'drama' and 'plot'. We use some industry-derived terms (like 'game mechanic' and 'gameplay') that have only soft meanings and are frequently misunderstood. We get caught up in arguments with outsiders like Ebert but lack a basic framework to refute what is said. And so we justify ourselves as artists in a secondary way, arguing about frames of reference and feebly citing *Planescape: Torment* to try and prove our artistic chops.



It is difficult for many of us to say out loud that games are an art and game makers are artists. We feel foolish

The root of the problem is language.

In Orwell's 1984, the language of Newspeak deliberately eliminates words from the dictionary. If the word does not exist then the idea cannot form, and so revolution is intellectually quashed. The games industry has constructed its own Gamespeak. It lacks a terminology of art that both insiders and outsiders can understand, so it has no coherent voice and no way to form the idea.

Most of the people who talk at TED about games are not game developers. They are researchers, social network people or location service makers and what they represent as 'games' is very small. Yet they are winning the language land-grab and defining games as behavioural simulators.

The game industry seems to have nothing to add to that discussion. There's no clear voice engaging in the debate saying there's more to it than just rewards and engagement tricks. Nobody's telling an alternative marketing story. And so games become painted as either Foursquare meets Groupon and virtual goods, or a mangled extension of the movie industry.

Language and legitimacy are the same thing. We cannot tell the story of why games are an art or why they are awesome if we do not have the words to tell it. We cannot borrow legitimacy, nor can it be given to us. We must shape it for ourselves and tell a story about games that is overwhelmingly positive.

What are games? What are they really good at? How do they actually make lives better? How are we enlightening the world? What are their enlightening qualities? That's the story that I want to tell, and I want you to tell too. Videogames are not stories, not mechanical gameplay engines, nor are they reality simulations. They incorporate bits of all those things, but it's not what they are.

They are magical worlds. The art of games is not the art of drama. It is the art of thauma. Thauma is a word I invented. It comes from thaumaturgy and means a state of miraculous transformation. Art is not a membership club. It is anything that changes the world. Our art is an art because we say it is in words that we own.

Games are an art built on portraiture in motion. You step into a game and you step into another place. We make something that takes players somewhere, and in the process we lighten their lives in a unique way. And, being unique, that art deserves new words.

Videogames are the world's thaumatic art.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him online at whatgamesare.com



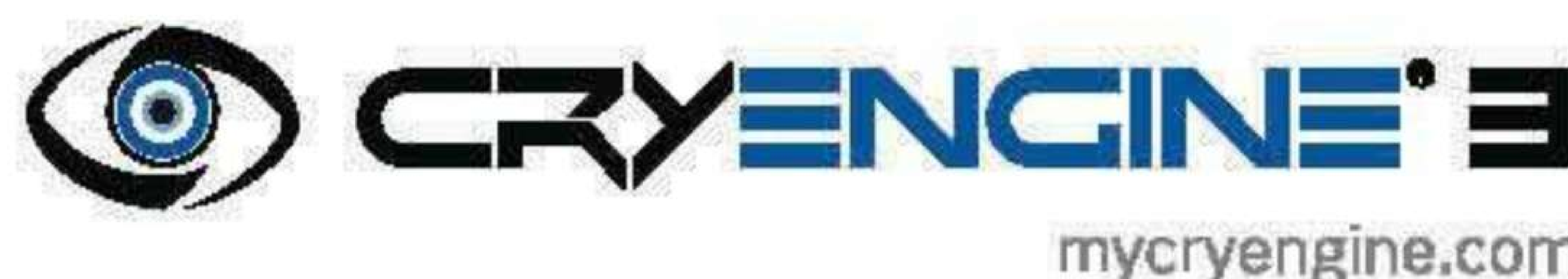
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CLINT HOCKING

The elephants in the room (part six): the NOGAS Point

A couple of years ago I was talking to game designer Harvey Smith about the levelling off of the curve of the graphical arms race. We were speculating as to how long it would be before the constant increase in visual fidelity would take us to the point where the graphics in a game could be indistinguishable from reality. I suggested that while I did not think we were very close to that point, I suspected we may have already passed the point of No One Gives A Shit. From then on I started referring to that point in time – which I now believe is in the past – as the NOGAS Point.

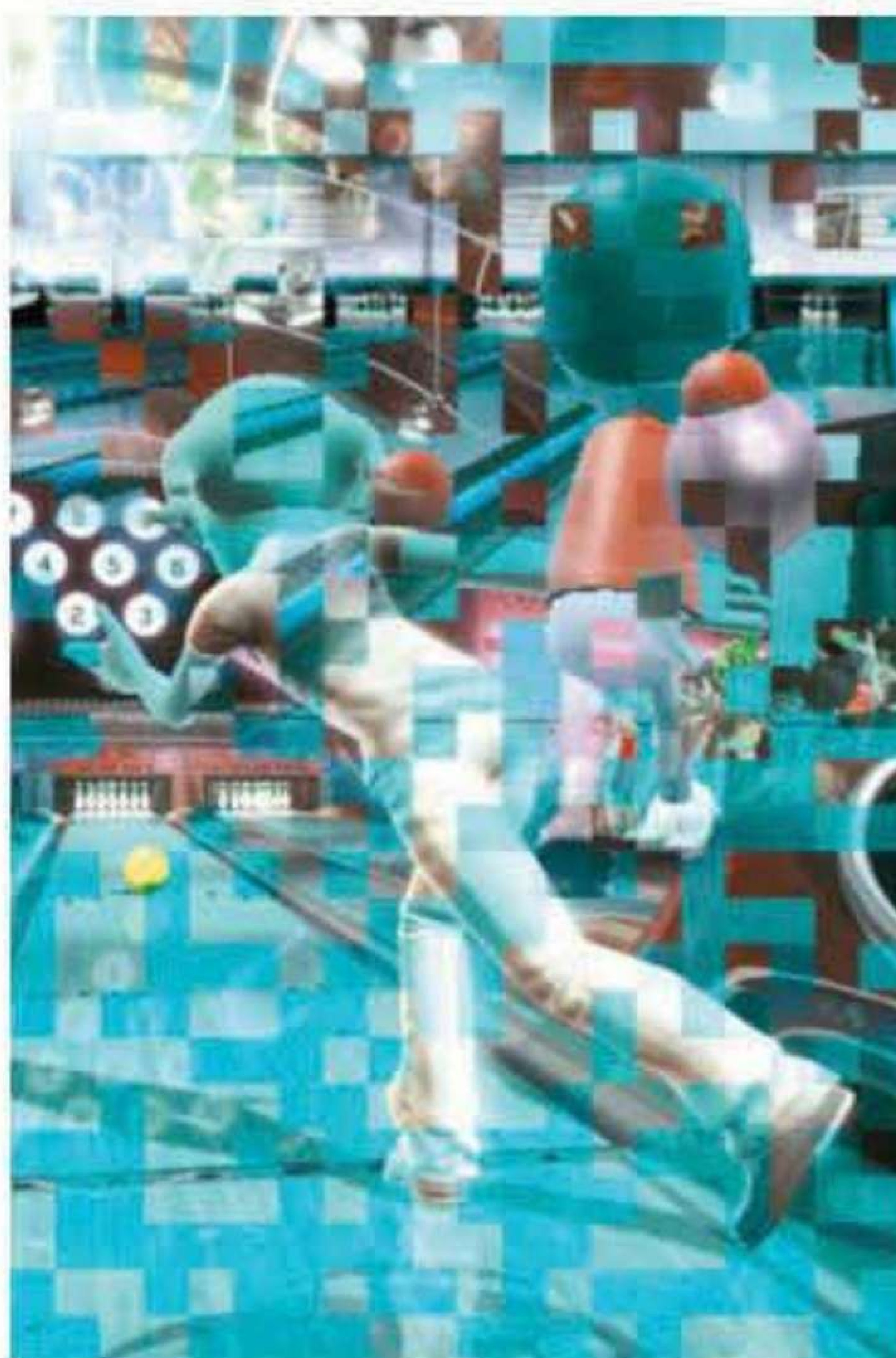
My current, and more rigorous, definition of the NOGAS Point is: the moment in time when the baseline graphical quality deliverable at runtime in a game stopped being the principle motivator in game purchasing for the average gamer.

What this means is that the average person still cares about graphics and – all things being equal – would prefer superior graphics over inferior graphics. But all things are not equal. Gamers will happily accept inferior graphics in exchange for mobility. They will accept the hyperreal eclecticism of seeing themselves onscreen in a game played with a camera. They will accept cartoony characters in order to play with motion controllers. The incredible success of the Wii and the explosion of mobile, tablet, phone and thin-client web gaming has effectively proven we are beyond the NOGAS Point.

I think the biggest open question for games going forward – and the one that will likely determine the structure of the game industry for the next decade or more – is how the NOGAS Point will impact the future of gaming hardware. I am not exactly sure how it's going to shake out, but here is the question I keep asking myself: if I had $600 to allot to gaming, what would I rather spend it on?

Would I buy a $599 set-top console with a dual-analogue controller, an HDMI cable, and one bundled triple-A launch title that offers eight hours of linear gameplay and graphics that incrementally improve on subsurface scattering algorithms, spherical harmonic lighting and radiosity, and a beer?

Or would I rather buy a $299 fifth-generation tablet that wirelessly streams HD visuals to any TV, plus a Bluetooth dual-analogue controller for $60, allowing me to play triple-A games with current-gen graphics, while giving me the capability to simply take that tablet anywhere and use it to work and play on just as I do today? Plus a dozen or more games ranging in cost from full-price triple-A console games to 99¢ mobile games? And a case of beer?



The average person – all things being equal – would prefer superior graphics. But all things are not equal

Some people will say I am crazy and that they would prefer *Call Of Duty 8* with better graphics because they are not going to play it on the bus anyway. That's a valid point, but I am not talking about playing *Call Of Duty* on the bus. I am talking about having *Call Of Duty* in your pocket so that next time you are bored in a hotel room you can instantly connect to the TV, or next time you and four friends give up watching the match because it's a blowout, you can all pull out your tablets or phones and play without the need to all go back to your own set-top boxes and reconvene virtually.

And all of this is to say nothing of the new kinds of ways you would be able to access your game. Open-world games or RPGs like *Assassin's Creed* or *The Elder Scrolls* or *GTA* can offer more robust simulations of other activities such as developing your citadel or empire, or managing your crime family or guild. All of these new activities could add depth and richness to the simulated worlds, and could easily be designed to be played bite-by-bite as a supplement to the main portion of the game.

Another factor in the equation is the rise of alternate input devices. If the next generation of set-top boxes is going to continue to introduce expensive new alternate input devices including motion sensors, cameras, touchpads, exercise devices, 3D glasses, musical instruments and who knows what else – all in addition to the standard dual-analogue controllers – is the typical consumer really going to want to spend top dollar on the box itself and then shell out hundreds more for peripherals?

To me, I guess, it seems that the cost of a super-hot octo-core machine that requires multiple peripherals and a separate power supply with lots of fans is that I have to have a big, dedicated box plugged into the wall and plugged into my television in exchange for an incremental graphical improvement. What I would prefer is to skip a generation of graphical iteration and do away with all the bulk and cables and heat and cut the chains that tie my triple-A gaming experience down in exchange for mobility, accessibility and the creativity that will need to come from designers to drive this future forward.

This future does not prevent me from playing immersive triple-A action games in HD in the dark on my couch – it liberates me to play those games, and many more, in many different ways, whenever and wherever I want.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



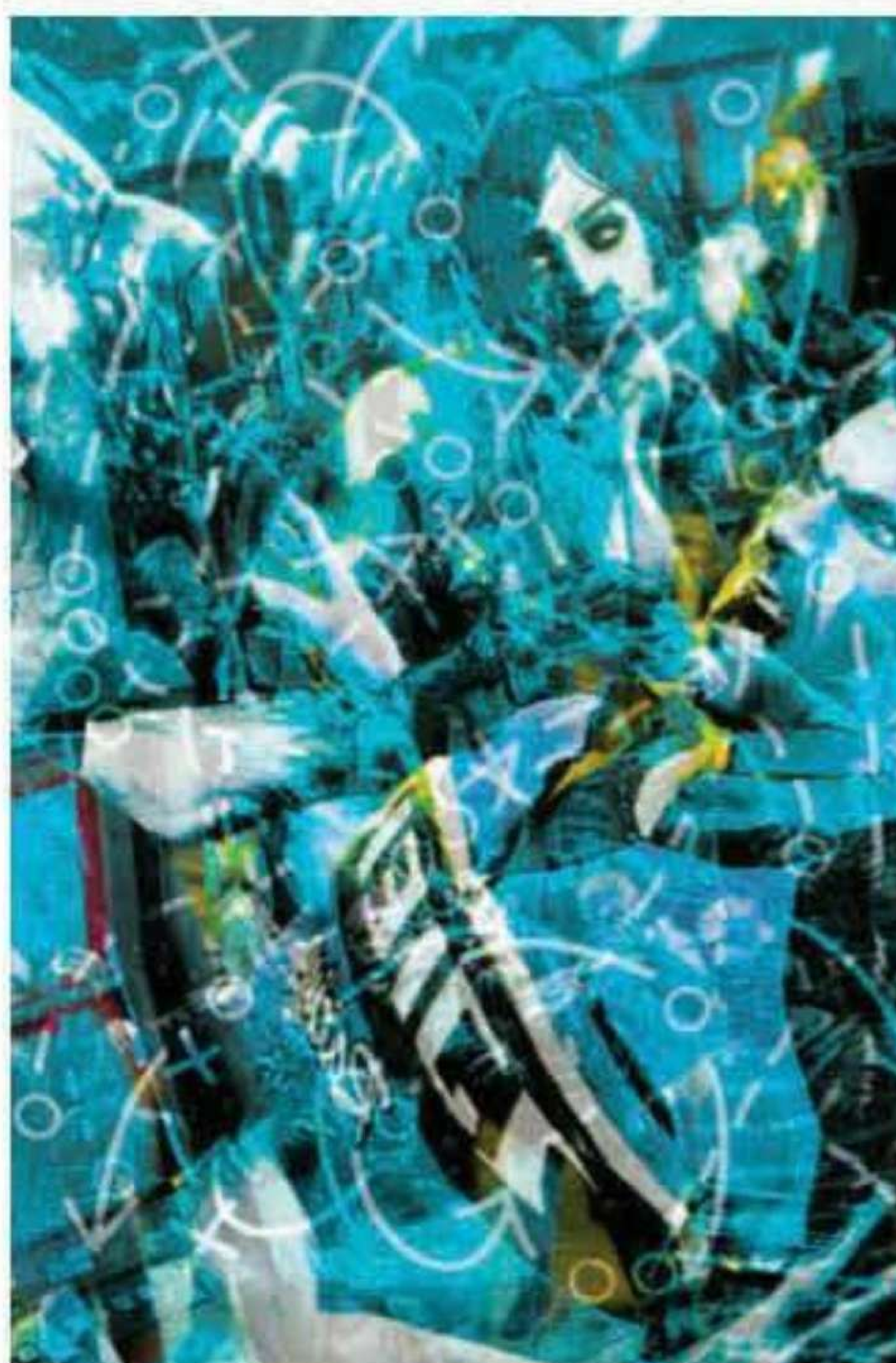
RANDY SMITH

Professor Smith's lecture on zombie rustling will begin immediately

The first thing you learn is that you should keep moving. You can't kill them all, and bullying hordes of weaker, dumber enemies is a tempting indulgence that only slows you down. Next you learn to avoid becoming surrounded by upright, alert ones, lest they claw you to the floor in a vicious pigpile. These observations quickly lead to the most recurring conundrum: what to do about the milling crowd blocking your way? Personally, I try to end-run them, giving myself a mobility advantage by smashing through store windows or climbing on to separators. When that fails, I line up the one in front and jump kick him into the group, knocking them down comically. This manoeuvre leaves me in their midst, potentially vulnerable, so I flail around a bit, ideally with a spiked bat, to take the starch out of the most aggressive ones. Often, this sets me up nicely to punch through the back of the mob and into the clear.

That's Zombie Rustling 101 in an extensive curriculum called Dead Rising (2). My love affair is not with this game, per se, but with the design principle that makes it shine. Nothing above is stated directly by the game rules. There is no 'end-run' button. 'End-run' is a sequence of related actions and events, never exactly the same twice, which I've identified as a recurring phenomenon useful to my play style. The first-order mechanics are much more bland and finite: swinging a weapon, changing movement or orientation, a zombie lurches, a window breaks. These primitives only have implication in the larger game context, where nothing enforces that cool things must occur. The game is agnostic, just simulating whatever happens to transpire. Since you could be smashing windows pointlessly in a corner, it's that much more awesome when you effect a dramatic escape by pulling off a questionable plan. There was no cutscene. You created the drama. You wrote the story. All the designer did was give you the tools and the stage.

Similarly, I don't select 'knock zombies down like bowling pins' from a menu. It's another composite tactic I evolved as I became increasingly familiar with the game mechanics,



Running through the infested mall is such an unconstrained experience I bet every player has a different approach

which lend themselves to this kind of thing, a chain reaction where my kick turns one zombie into a projectile which (assuming all goes well) collides with another, and so forth. It's emergent but not unpredicted; the designers intended for this to happen, or at least approved of it. But to me, it is mine. I was not explicitly trained to do this. I don't even know if other players have a better technique. In fact, running through the infested mall is such an unconstrained experience I bet every player has a different style and approach. What values do they prioritise? Are they more courageous and less avoidant? Do they indulge in the occasional revenge attack when a zombie irritates them? This is the most effortless and native type of self-expression that games provide.

Let's zoom in on some systemic depth. Weapons have a number of parameters: speed of attack, area of effect, how vulnerable you are after swinging, how quickly you can attack again. How likely a hit is to push them back, knock them down, dismember or destroy. If you imagine each parameter as an axis, you can map every weapon into a multidimensional space. Near one corner is the sword with fast, focused attacks that do little to stop zombies until it kills them one at a time. Far into some other corner is the park bench with an enormous, slow swing, which upends scores of zombies but leaves you vulnerable. Experimenting with different weapons is like moving around this space. It also involves engaging with a variety of mechanics and scenarios, which can be considered axes too. This thinking is why designers often describe games as conceptual spaces that players explore non-physically. Developing the 'bowling pin' technique requires becoming familiar with one area of the simulation space.

There's tons more to be said about *Dead Rising*. I love its endlessly witty portrayal of American consumer culture. It does an 'improvising weapons from the environment' Bourne Identity thing shamefully better than the eponymous game. Its inconspicuous approach to introducing new features should be studied by every designer. These successes are built on the systemic foundation which, tellingly, the failures struggle against, forcing you to fight poorly simulated humans, confounding your controls, or imposing constraints which reduce open-endedness without encouraging your experimentation.

Among all the zombie games (quick, name ten!) and fighting games (name ∞!), *Dead Rising* is different. These systems are crafted especially for 'fighting your way through the zombie hordes'. And, as real game systems, they don't just depict but actually provide the experience in a way that no other medium can.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch

Word play

JAMES LEACH



The hero's so-called journey, and the player's so-called part in it

Remember when games consisted of simply facing wave after wave of slightly tougher, faster baddies? Well, times have changed. Modern games consist of simply facing wave after wave of slightly tougher, faster baddies, but with better graphics and, somewhere, a plot.

How much do you care about the plot? In films and books it's everything. There is nothing but the narrative and how it's revealed. But in games the plot is there to provide information about what the player has to do next. Game experiences are pretty much the same from beginning to end, so there are limits to what the plot can do. Yep, it'll take you from downtown to the harbour area and then to the luxury villas, or maybe from the desert world to the jungle world via an icy world, but we all know you'll be doing the same things, surrounded by a different tileset.

What happens when you pick up a game? You learn just as much as you need to know to be able to play it. You charge through the levels, enjoying your success and reaping the rewards in terms of bigger bangs and harder challenges. You get to unlock the mountains, the desert, the harbour area. Does plot ever really come into it? And tied up with story are of course the characters. Are they more than just a collection of targets? Do you care about them? Is the game even trying to get you to care?

The first thing is that games are for playing. Everything has to support the gameplay experience. Plots are one of the bigger things which can actually get in the way. Too many cutscenes or characters, too much exposition, dialogue which comes across as too cute or too wooden, too many references to films or other games. None of them is going to make a game better.

So it's all doom and gloom? Well, no, it isn't. The trick is to remember that this isn't just writing; it's games writing. There's a big difference to writing for any other discipline. For example, take characters. In a game, the player is usually the main character. Unlike, say, a film, you can't tell the player how to feel, whether to care, or what to think. Counter-intuitively, it's far harder to make a player really 'feel' anything his character is supposed to than it is to make that same person empathise with a character in a movie. Playing games is immersive but it also has a remoteness. Although this is diminishing, helped in part by more inclusive control methods like Kinect and the growing number of firstperson games, when you play a game, the character you are is never you. However, you can't root for that character like a fan would, because you actually control it. You are thus in an odd limbo. Pain in the bum, isn't it?



Stories are passive things. They're like roller-coasters. The fun comes from the very lack of control

The bum pain gets worse. The main character in a book or film undergoes an arc. He or she changes greatly as the tale unfolds. It's fundamental to what makes stories work. And how can you do this in a game? Not easily. As we've just seen, you can't make the player feel what the character would, and you can't make the player change. Really you can't tinker with the player's onscreen character at all. If there's a *Fable*-like option to do so, that's the player's job. Could you imagine trying to tell a player that suddenly their character is no longer scared and will fight to the death? No, that's not your decision to make, game developer.

One answer is not to try and make the player care about and react to abstract ideas in the plot, but to make them *do* something dramatic and life-changing. Give up the weapon, sacrifice the faithful sidekick, swan-dive off the dam. Ideally the thing they do should provide the wow factor, even if only for the visual effect. Wow moments aren't selective, and if your jaw drops at something you see in a game, it can easily lend its awesomeness to the storyline that got you there. Cheating, you reckon? Come here and say that.

Stories are passive things. They're like roller-coasters. The fun comes from the very lack of control. How does this translate to games? You turn the story into a series of achievable goals for the player and give them the sense that they're forming it rather than just triggering the next bit. And you create a world that reacts to the goals achieved by the player. You add in some twists which the player can't avoid, you provide (and maybe take away) characters you'd like the player – via the player's character – to care about. Then you get it all animated and you make sure the voice actors who record the dialogue know exactly what it is they're saying and what it means, and you make them stand up because you can always tell when they're sitting down. That last one is probably for another article.

So you've got a great story written carefully for a game which knows how to present it. You've avoided the bad dialogue, the scattering of regional voiceover accents and the stolen catchphrases. Maybe you've even got a three-act structure in place. There might even be moments where the story is genuinely grown-up and all the more moving for it. You can relax. And remember that if the title does extremely well, it'll be because of the gameplay.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

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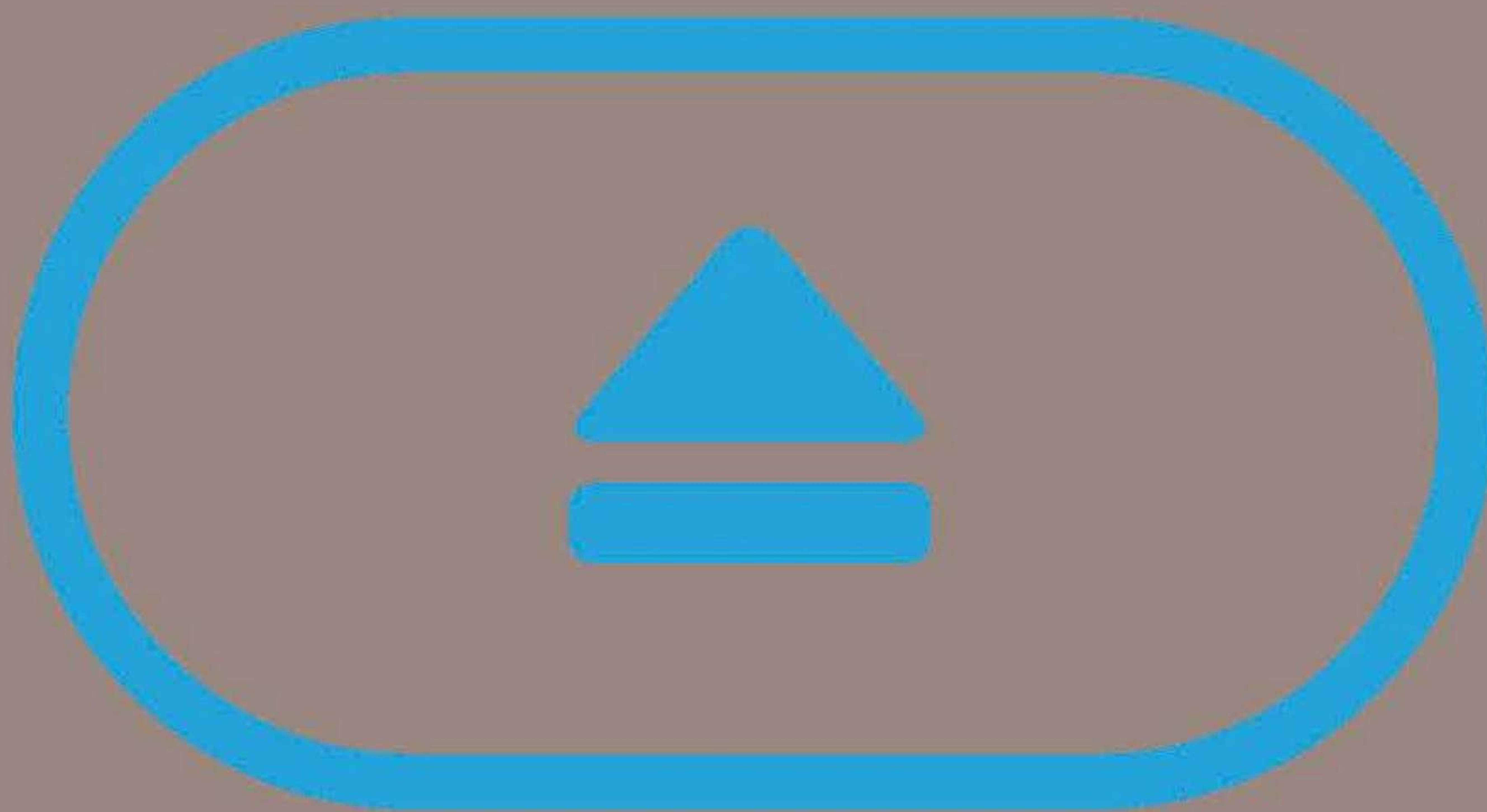
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